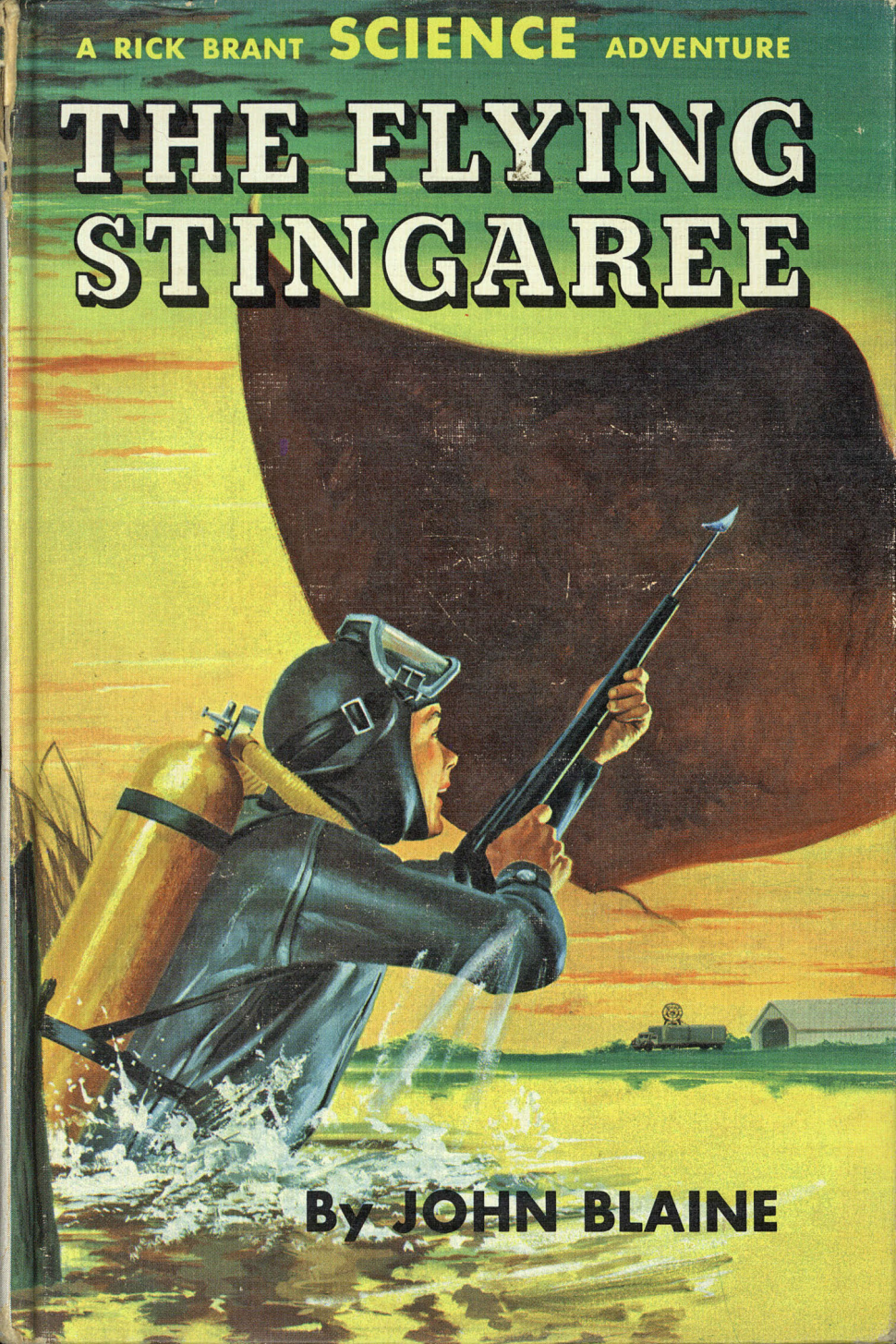
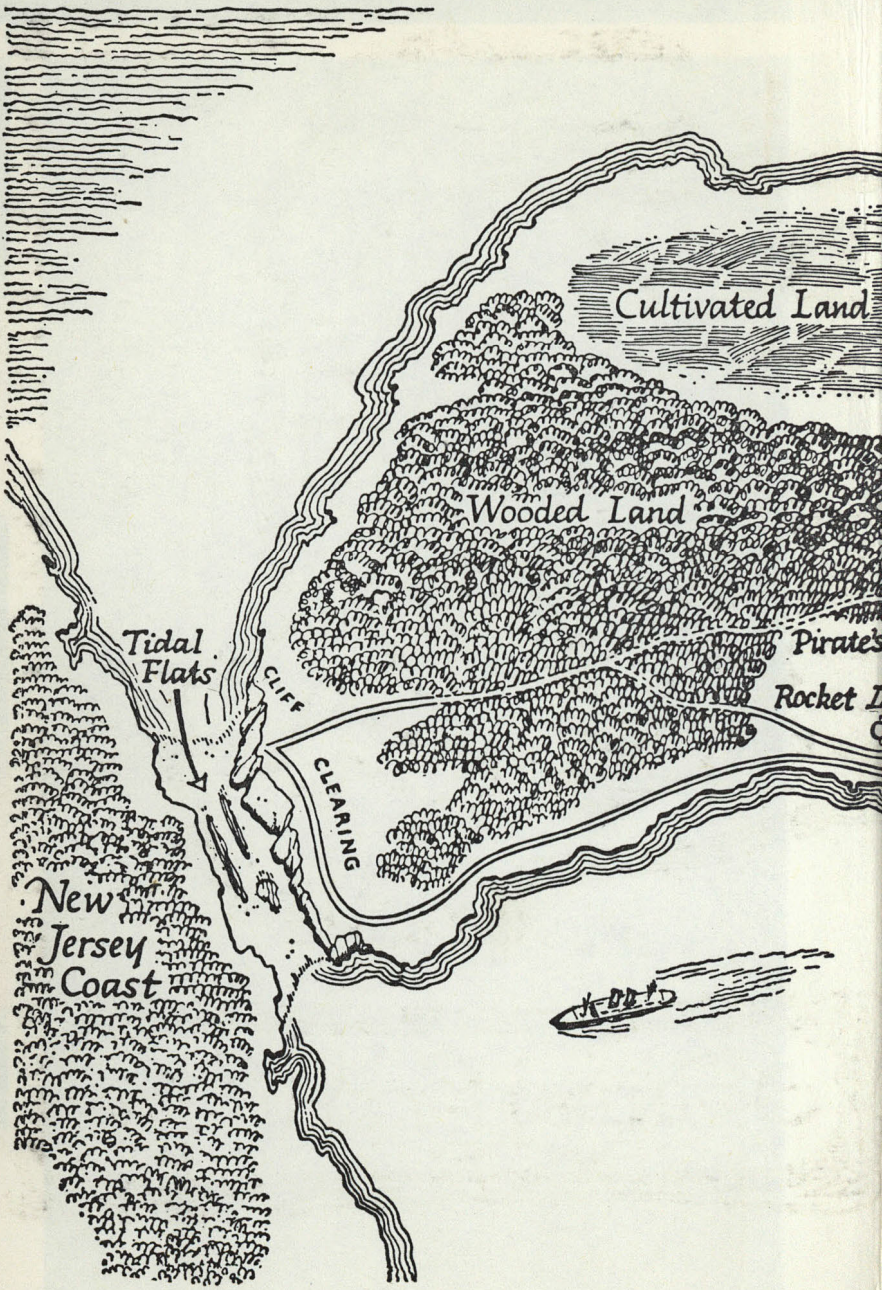
A RICK BRANT SCIENCE ADVENTURE

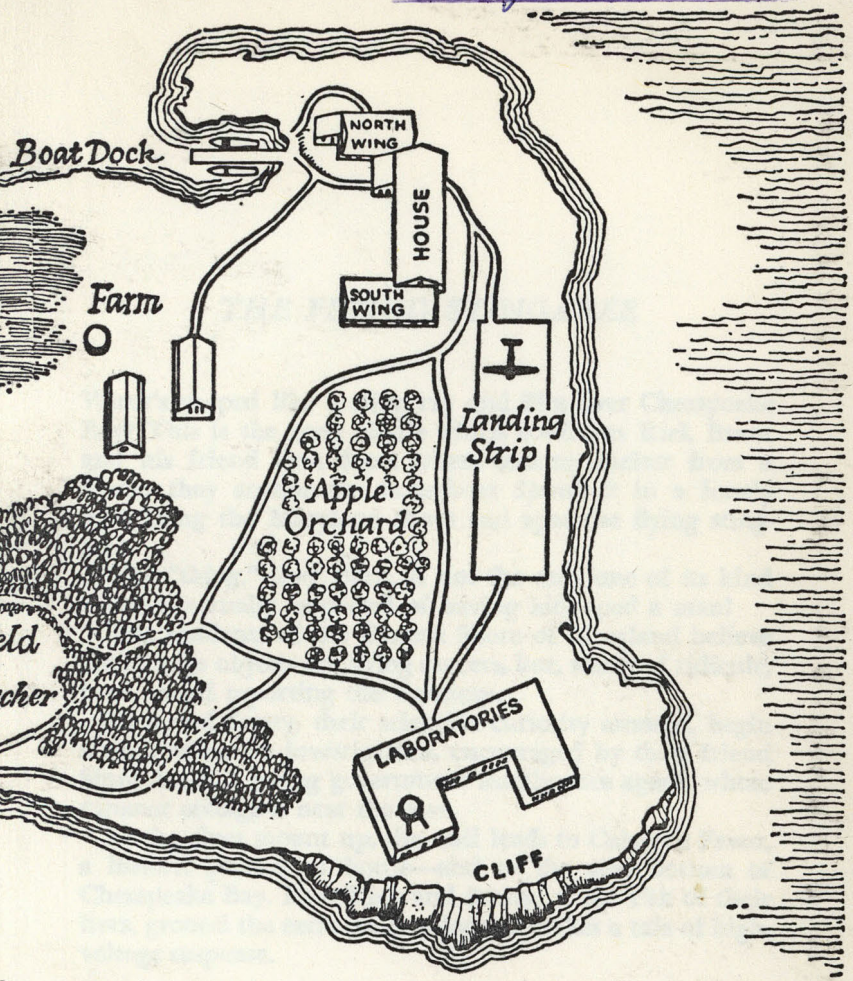
THE FLYING STINGAREE



By JOHN BLAINE


Cultivated Land
Wooded Land
Tidal Flats
CLIFF
CLEARING
Pirate's
Rocket
New Jersey Coast

Margaret Crowther



SPINDRIFT ISLAND

THE FLYING STINGAREE

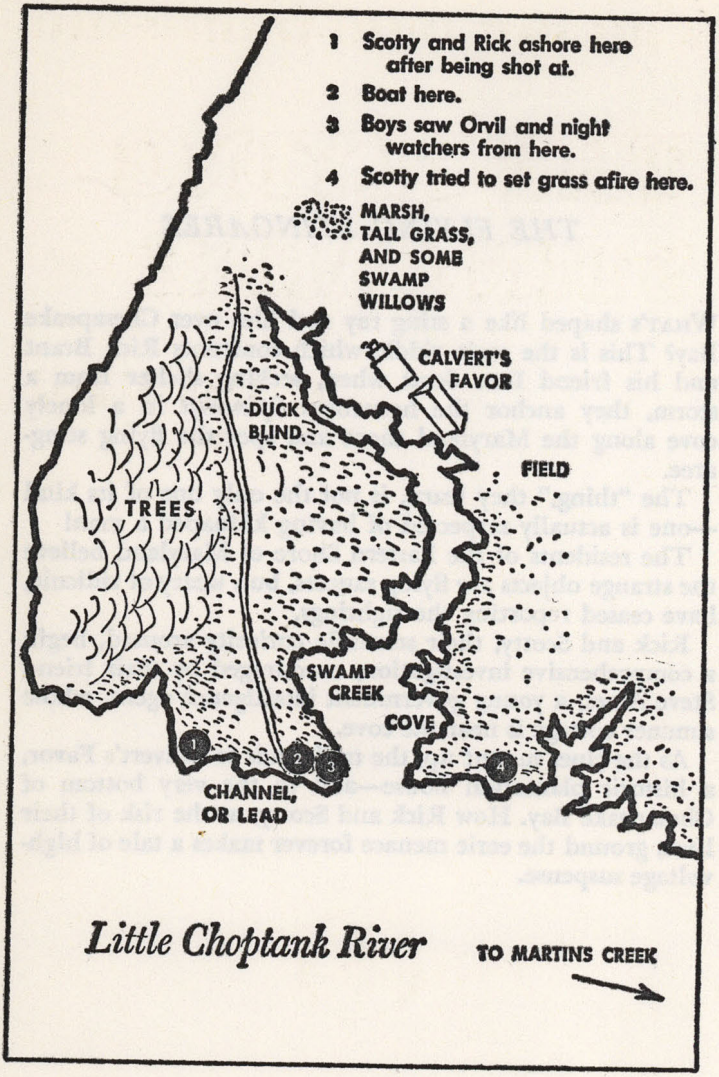
WHAT'S shaped like a sting ray and flies over Chesapeake Bay? This is the eerie riddle which confronts Rick Brant and his friend Don Scott when, seeking shelter from a storm, they anchor the houseboat *Spindrift* in a lonely cove along the Maryland shore and spot the flying stingaree.

The "thing," they learn, is not the only one of its kind —one is actually suspected of having kidnaped a man!

The residents of the Eastern Shore of Maryland believe the strange objects are flying saucers, but, weary of ridicule, have ceased reporting the sightings.

Rick and Scotty, their scientific curiosity aroused, begin a comprehensive investigation, encouraged by their friend Steve Ames, a young government intelligence agent, whose summer cottage is near the cove.

As the clues mount up, the trail leads to Calvert's Favor, a historic plantation house—and to the very bottom of Chesapeake Bay. How Rick and Scotty, at the risk of their lives, ground the eerie menace forever makes a tale of high-voltage suspense.


1 Scotty and Rick ashore here after being shot at.
2 Boat here.
3 Boys saw Orvil and night watchers from here.
4 Scotty tried to set grass afire here.
MARSH, TALL GRASS, AND SOME SWAMP WILLOWS
CALVERT'S FAVOR
DUCK BLIND
FIELD
TREES
SWAMP CREEK
COVE
CHANNEL, OR LEAD
Little Choptank River
TO MARTINS CREEK

A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY

THE FLYING STINGAREE

BY JOHN BLAINE

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To
my sons,
CHRIS *and* DEREK,
who have watched the stingarees
from the sun deck of the
cruising houseboat
Spindrift

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CHAPTER I

Chesapeake Bay

THE stingaree swam slowly through the warm waters of Chesapeake Bay. Geography meant nothing to the ray, whose sole interest in life was food, but his position—had he known it—was in the channel that runs between Poplar Island and the town of Wittman on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The ray was also directly in the path of an odd-looking cruising houseboat, the *Spindrift,* that had just rounded the north point of Poplar Island and entered the channel.

The sting ray's color was an olive brown, so dark in tone that he looked like wet black leather. He was roughly diamond-shaped, like a kite, with rounded sides. He had a long, slim tail that carried vicious barbs along the base of its upper side. It was from the barbs, which served as defensive weapons, that the name sting ray, or stingaree, derived. The ray was harmless to men—unless one chanced to step on him as he lay resting on the bottom ooze. At such rare times, his tail would lash up, inflicting a serious and painful wound.

A tiny crab, hatched only a week before, swam up-

ward toward the gleaming surface, his churning legs making a slight disturbance. The ray sensed the small vibrations and instantly changed course, speeding through the water like a fantastic spaceship of the future. Intent on the crab, the ray ignored the stronger vibrations caused by a pair of outboard motors and a long, flat-bottomed hull. Not until the crab was within reach did the ray sense imminent danger. With a single flashing movement, he snatched the crab and flung himself upward through the shining surface and into the air.

Rick Brant, at the helm of the cruising houseboat, saw the ray break water and he let out a yell. "Scotty! Look!"

Don Scott, asleep at full length on the houseboat's sun deck, which was also its cabin top, awoke in time to see the dark shape reenter the calm water. "Stingaree!" he exclaimed.

Rick had never seen an area more teeming with life than Chesapeake Bay, unless it was the jungles of the South Pacific. Books, guides to eastern land and water birds, regional fish and reptiles, rested on the cabin top before him, along with a pair of binoculars. He had used them all repeatedly, identifying eagles, wild swans, ospreys, wild duck and geese, terrapin, snapping turtles and water snakes, as well as a horde of lesser creatures. Trailing lines over the houseboat stern had captured striped sea bass, called "rockfish" locally, a species of drumfish called "spot" because of a black spot on the gills, pink croakers that the Marylanders called "hardheads," and the blue crabs for which the bay is famous. He had seen clam dredges bringing up bushels of soft-shelled, long-necked

clams that the dredgers called "manos," and he had seen the famous Maryland "bugeyes" and "skipjacks"—sailing craft used for dredging oysters. The boats were not operated during the oyster breeding season from the end of March until September.

Rick's interest in the life of the great bay was to be expected. As son of the director of the world-famous Spindrift Scientific Foundation, located on Spindrift Island off the coast of New Jersey, he had been brought up among scientists. The habit of observation had developed along with his natural—and insatiable—curiosity.

The tall, slim, brown-haired, brown-eyed boy was completely happy. He enjoyed casual living, especially on the water, and life on the *Spindrift* couldn't have been more casual. He was dressed in a tattered pair of shorts and a wristwatch. Once, in the cool of the evening, he had slipped on a sweat shirt. Otherwise, the shorts had been his sole attire while on board since leaving his home island a few days before.

Scotty, a husky, dark-haired boy clad only in red swimming trunks, came down the ladder from the cabin top and stood beside Rick in the cockpit. "Now that you woke me up to look at a fish, suppose you tell me where we are? Last thing I remember, we were passing under the Bay Bridge off Annapolis."

"That's Bloody Point Lighthouse behind us," Rick said. "Poplar Island is on the starboard and the Eastern Shore to port. That black thing sticking up ahead of us is a light buoy. When we reach it, we should be able to see the range markers into Knapps Narrows."

Scotty checked the chart on the table hinged to

the bulkhead formed by the rear cabin wall. "What time is it?"

Rick glanced at his watch. "Five after six. Time for chow. Want to rustle up something? Or shall we eat at Knapps Narrows? The cruising guide says there's a restaurant there."

"Let's eat out," Scotty replied promptly. "I'm sick of my cooking—and yours. I'd like some Maryland crab cakes like those we had in Chesapeake City."

Rick remembered with pleasure. "Suits me."

"Think we'll get to Steve's tonight?" Scotty asked.

"I doubt it. We probably could reach the mouth of the river about dark, but then we'd have to navigate up the river and into a creek before reaching Steve's. I don't want to tackle these Chesapeake backwaters at night."

The destination of the houseboat was the summer cottage of Rick's old friend, Steve Ames, who was also a chief agent of JANIG, the top-secret Federal security organization. The boys, and the Spindrift scientists, had worked on several cases for JANIG, starting with the adventure of *The Whispering Box Mystery*. Steve was responsible for Rick's ownership of the houseboat, which had been named for Rick's home island on the grounds that it was now his "home away from home."

Rick's first glimpse of the houseboat had been from the air. At the request of Steve Ames, he, Scotty, his sister Barby, and Jan Miller, daughter of one of the Spindrift physicists, had been searching the coast of New Jersey for signs of strangers in the area. Barby had spotted the houseboat, which at that time was painted a bright orange. Later, the houseboat had

played a major role in the adventure of *The Electronic Mind Reader,* and Rick had fought for his life and the safety of the two girls in the very cabin behind which he now stood. The houseboat had been impounded by Federal authorities, and recently Steve had mentioned to Rick that it was to be auctioned. After consulting with his family, Rick had entered a bid for the boat. His bid had been the only one, and he became owner at what was close to a salvage price.

It was Rick's pride that his chief possessions had been bought with his own money, and the houseboat was no exception. Like his first plane, the Cub, he expected the houseboat to pay its own way. Rick had recovered his investment in the Cub by using it to operate Spindrift Island's ferry service to the mainland. Rick flew the scientists to Newark Airport when they had to catch planes, or he flew to Whiteside for groceries, or into New York to pick up parts and supplies. The houseboat could not be used in the same way, but he was sure he could get its price back by renting it to summer visitors to the New Jersey area. He had repainted it in two shades of green with a white top, and had made a few other improvements.

Before renting the boat, however, he intended to have an extended houseboat vacation. He and Scotty had left Spindrift Island, headed south into Manasquan Inlet, and then sailed into the inland waterway. By easy stages—the houseboat could make only ten miles an hour—they had moved down the waterway into Delaware Bay, up the Delaware River, through the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, and into Chesapeake Bay. Now, some twenty miles south of An-

napolis, the boys were nearing Steve's summer cottage.

Rick's parents, with Barby and Jan, were now on their way to Wallops Island rocket range operated by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Hartson Brant had business there in connection with instruments the Spindrift group of scientists had designed for measuring solar X rays. The instruments would be launched in rockets. Wallops Island was near Chincoteague, Virginia, just across the Maryland-Virginia border on the long peninsula called "The Eastern Shore" that runs between Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. By car, Wallops was less than two hours from Steve's summer cottage.

As soon as his business was concluded, Hartson Brant planned to drive to Steve's, where the Brants and the two girls would join Rick and Scotty for a vacation on the houseboat. There was plenty of room. The *Spindrift* was thirty feet long and ten feet wide, and had two cabins. Four could sleep in the forward cabin, and two amidships where the galley, dinette, and bath were located. Steve had agreed to drive the Brant car to Spindrift on his next trip to New York. The houseboat, with the full clan aboard, would travel leisurely back to the home island.

Rick was delighted with the arrangements. The Brants—and that included Scotty, who had become one of them after his discharge from the United States Marine Corps—were a close-knit family whose members enjoyed doing things together. Rick considered Jan Miller, Barby's dearest friend, a welcome addition to the party.

"Range light ahead," Scotty said.

Rick nodded. The light was set atop a black piling. The color meant he would have to pass it to port, then pick up the red beacon at the entrance to the Narrows, passing the red beacon to starboard. This was in accordance with the old sailors' rule: *red right returning*, which means keep red markers and buoys on the starboard, or right, when returning from seaward. It was fun navigating in strange waters. He had never heard of Knapps Narrows a few days before, or of Tilghman Island, where the Narrows were located. Nor had he heard of the Choptank River, which lay just below the island.

The houseboat plowed ahead, its twin outboards purring. Its bow, rounded like the front of a toboggan, slapped into a slight swell. Rick passed the range light and headed for the red tower that marked the opening of the Narrows. In a few moments they were in the Narrows, passing lines of docked crab, oyster, and clam boats. There was a bridge ahead, with a gasoline dock in its shadow. Rick gauged wind and current and decided how he would maneuver into place. The current was heavy in the channel, running in the direction in which he was headed.

"I'll nose in, and you jump off with a bowline," he directed Scotty. "We'll let the stern swing around with the current. That will leave us facing the way we came, so we won't have to turn when we leave."

In a short time the maneuver was completed. Rick edged the rounded nose of the houseboat against the seawall as Scotty stepped ashore carrying the bowline. He snubbed it tightly around a piling and held fast while the ungainly boat swung with the current.

Rick stepped to the seawall with the stern line as the craft swung completely around, and the boys made the boat fast.

"Now," Scotty said, "let's gas up and eat."

After filling the gas tanks, loading the icebox with fresh ice, and topping off the water tank, the boys slipped into shirts, slacks, and shoes, then headed for the restaurant that adjoined the dock. Over delicious, spicy Maryland crab cakes and coffee, they talked with the proprietor, a friendly, heavy-set Eastern Shore man who spoke with the typical slurred accents of the region.

"Quite a boat you got there," the man said.

Rick grinned. "It does look sort of odd, but it's comfortable."

"Expect so. Thought it was a seagoin' flyin' saucer when I saw it comin' through the Narrows."

Scotty munched crab cake appreciatively. "Seen many flying saucers around here?" he asked whimsically.

"A few."

The boys stared.

The man smiled at the reaction. "Didn't expect that? It's true. We see one now and again."

"Really?" Rick asked.

"Sure as geese fly. Don't know that they're really flyin' saucers like we read about in the Washington and Baltimore papers—we get both—but they're somethin' strange. Not natural, anyway."

The boys looked at each other. There was no doubt that the proprietor believed what he was saying. He was as casual as though reporting a catch of fish.

"Seen any recently?" Scotty inquired.

"Two nights ago. Always see 'em about dusk. Real plain, against the sky. Sun hits 'em when they get high enough. They shine, sometimes silver, sometimes red."

"Funny we haven't seen anything about it in the papers," Rick commented.

"Oh, I don't know. Used to be we'd report 'em, and the papers carried a few lines. But the way the stories got written, you'd think us Eastern Shore folks were short a few marbles. We got tired of being laughed at, so no one says much about the saucers any more."

"But lots of people see them?" Scotty asked.

"Sure. Anyone that happens to be outdoors."

"Ever report these sightings to the authorities?" Rick wanted to know.

"Did at first. Called the State Police myself. The Coast Guard boys are located right here at the Narrows, and they reported to Baltimore. Nothin' happened. The authorities aren't sold on flyin' saucers, you might say. I guess the last report was when Link Harris was kidnaped by one."

Rick's scalp prickled. "You honestly mean someone was kidnaped by a flying saucer?"

"It's the only thing we can think of. Link went out to set his crab lines, like always, and never came home. We set out to find him, and we found his boat all right, but no Link. One of the saucers was seen by several folks, and they said later it seemed right over where he was workin' at about the time he was there."

The boys digested this startling information. "Maybe he was drowned," Rick ventured.

"In a creek? Not likely! Link's been crabbin' for

thirty years in these waters. Water was smooth. Not a ripple, even out on the bay. Even if he fell over, he could almost walk ashore. Tide was out and he was settin' lines in about six feet, and he's better than two yards high. Shore wasn't more than twenty yards away."

"Maybe he hit his head when he fell," Scotty suggested.

"Possible, but even if he drowned we'd have found his body."

Rick shook his head. "It's hard to believe a man could be kidnaped by a flying saucer. Couldn't he have gone ashore and walked out of the area? Maybe he *wanted* to disappear."

"You're mighty hard to convince," the proprietor said good-humoredly. It was clear he didn't particularly care whether they were convinced or not. He was making conversation just to be sociable. "Where Link was settin' lines is just a little creek with marsh all around. No man with any sense would get out of a boat and go ashore into marshland, now would he? Besides, there's no reason Link would want to disappear. He lived all alone and did about what he pleased. Crabs netted him enough money for his needs."

"How long ago did this happen?" Rick asked.

"Two, three weeks. Not long."

"Where?" Scotty queried.

"Few miles south. In a creek off the Little Choptank."

"That's where we're going!" Rick exclaimed.

"So? Well, watch for Swamp Creek. It's on the

chart. That's where they got Link. Where you headed?"

"A place called Martins Creek," Rick replied.

"Uh-huh. Well, Martins is on the south shore, and Swamp Creek is on the north, about three miles closer to the river mouth. You'll pass it on the way. Better keep an eye open. That boat of yours might attract flyin' saucers the way a decoy attracts ducks."

Rick saw the twinkle in the proprietor's eye. "We'll set a bear trap on the upper deck," he said. "Any flying saucer tries to pick us up, the pilot will catch one of his six legs in it."

"Likely," the man agreed. "You catch one, bring it to the Narrows, will you? Always wanted to see one at close range."

"We'll do that," Rick agreed, and no premonition or hunch warned him how close he and Scotty would come to carrying out the promise.

CHAPTER II

The Flying Stingaree

SOMEONE once said that the Chesapeake Bay "looks like the deck plan of an octopus," but the mental image created by the phrase tells but a fraction of the story. Rivers and creeks empty into the bay by the dozens, and every river, and most of the creeks, have tributaries. Even some of the tributaries have tributaries. The result is thousands of miles of navigable waters, forming a maze of waterways that it would take most of a lifetime of weekend cruising to explore.

The cruising houseboat *Spindrift* moved steadily across the mouth of one of the principal waterways of the Eastern Shore, the Choptank River. It was a good three miles across the river's mouth, and Rick occupied the time by reading aloud to Scotty, who was piloting.

" 'The Choptank River is navigable for large ships to the city of Cambridge, a principal Eastern Shore port. Yachts will find the river navigable for twenty miles beyond Cambridge, depending on their draft, while boats of shallow draft can cruise all the way

into the State of Delaware.'" Rick paused in his reading and looked up. "Be fun to go up one of these rivers to the source, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe we can," Scotty replied. "Read on."

"'The name Choptank comes from the Choptank Indians who lived in the area until the middle of the nineteenth century. These Indians were first discovered by Captain John Smith when he sailed into Chesapeake Bay in search of a location for what later became the Jamestown Colony.'"

"We're sailing through history," Scotty commented. "And we'd better step on it." He pushed the throttles forward. The houseboat accelerated to its top speed of about twelve miles an hour.

"What's up?" Rick demanded.

"Look to the southwest. That must be one of those Chesapeake Bay squalls the book warns about."

There was a black line of clouds some distance away, but Rick could see that the squall line was moving fast, crossing the bay in their direction. He swung the chart table up and studied the situation. They were close to the south shore of the Choptank River now, and the chart showed no easily accessible place of shelter in the vicinity. They would have to run for the Little Choptank, the next river to the south. The chart showed several creeks off the Little Choptank. They could duck into the one nearest the river mouth.

"Can we ride it out if we have to?" Rick asked.

Scotty grinned. "We'll find out, if we have to. But I'd rather not be in open water when a squall hits this barge. It's not built for storms. Keep your fingers crossed and hope we get to cover before it hits."

"I hear you talking. I'm going to do a little research." Rick ducked into the cabin and took the tide tables from the bookshelf. Back on deck, he leafed through the official publication and found that the nearest point for tidal data was the Choptank River Light, only a few miles away and clearly visible. High and low tides at the light were about three hours and fifteen minutes earlier than Baltimore, the data station for the area. Rick checked Baltimore data for the date, subtracted quickly, and glanced at his watch.

"High tide in about a half hour. The chart shows three feet near shore at mean low water. High tide will bring it up to four and a half at the very least. That's plenty for this barge. Get inshore and cut corners. We won't have to stick to the channel."

Scotty swung the wheel instantly, and the houseboat took a new course, leading them closer to shore. "Better keep an eye out for logs or pilings," Scotty warned. "No rocks in the area, so we don't have to worry about shoals."

The wooded shore slid by, the trees gradually giving way to low scrub and marsh grass as they neared the mouth of the Little Choptank. Rick alternately kept an eye out ahead and checked their position on the chart. They were in about five feet of water, more than enough for the shallow-draft houseboat. His principal worry was the outboard propellers. He didn't want to break one on a log that might be sticking up underwater.

The squall was closer now, and the sky was growing dark. Rick estimated that they had no more than

ten minutes before the storm would hit. He had to look up at a sharp angle to see the storm front. Visibility was down to zero directly under it. Whitecaps and a roiling sea told him there was plenty of wind in the squall. He doubted that the houseboat could head into it successfully. The wind would catch the high cabin sides and force the houseboat onto the shore.

Scotty swung around the northern tip of land that marked the mouth of the Little Choptank. "We won't make it," he said, glancing at the chart.

Rick nodded. "But the wind will be behind us. We can drive right into the mouth of the nearest creek. According to the chart, there's a cove just inside the mouth where we ought to be out of the wind." He put his finger on the place, and suddenly a chill ran through him. The nearest safe harbor was Swamp Creek, where Link Harris had vanished!

There wasn't time to talk about it. He would have to be prepared to drop the anchor quickly. "I'm going up on the bow," he said. "Once into the creek, turn as hard as you can into the wind, then cut the power. I'll heave the anchor over and the wind pressure on the boat can set it. But keep the motors turning over in case it doesn't hold."

"Got it," Scotty agreed.

Rick stepped out of the cockpit onto the catwalk. The cabin top was just chest-high, and he could hold on by grabbing the safety rails that ran along the sides of the large sun deck. He moved swiftly along the walk to the foredeck, a small semicircular deck used primarily for docking and anchoring. The an-

chor line was coiled on a hook on the curving front of the cabin, and the patent anchor was stowed on the deck itself. Rick took the coil and faked down the line in smooth figure eights so it would run out without fouling, then made sure the anchor was free and ready to go.

When Rick stood up and looked down the length of the cabin top at Scotty, he saw that the squall was almost on them. The turbulent cloud front was directly overhead. He saw the wind line, marked by turbulent water, move swiftly toward the houseboat. The *Spindrift* rocked as though shaken by a giant hand, and its speed picked up appreciably. The houseboat began to pitch as the chop built up around it. Visibility dropped suddenly; it was almost dark. Rick winced as large, hard-driven raindrops lashed into his face, then he turned his back to the storm and stared ahead.

The creek mouth was in sight. He pointed to it for Scotty's benefit, but when he turned to look at his pal, the driving rain slashed into his eyes and made him look away.

Scotty had seen the creek mouth. Staying as close to shore as he dared, Scotty drove the houseboat to within fifty yards of the narrow mouth, then swung the helm hard. The wind, which had been astern, was now abeam and its force was acting on the high side of the boat. The houseboat slewed sideways, and for a moment Rick thought they would be driven on to the upstream bank of the creek. But Scotty had judged his distance and wind pressure well. The boat shot into the creek mouth with feet to spare.

The cove opened up ahead. Scotty reversed one motor and the houseboat turned almost in its own length. Rick watched the shore through squinting eyes, and the moment he saw the boat's forward motion cease, he dropped the big anchor over. The wind caught the houseboat again and drove it backward into the cove while the anchor line ran out. When he had enough line out for safety, Rick snubbed it tight around a cleat, held the taut line between thumb and forefinger until he was sure it had none of the vibrations caused by a dragging anchor, and then hurried back along the catwalk to the cockpit. He and Scotty ran from the rainswept deck down the two steps into the cabin.

For a moment the two stood grinning at each other and listening to the heavy drumming of the rain on the cabin top, then Rick spoke. "We'd better get out of these wet clothes so we can sit down. This may last for an hour or so."

Scotty agreed. "First one into dry shorts makes the coffee."

"That's me," Rick said. He stripped off the soaking clothes, toweled quickly, and put on dry shorts. The rain had chilled the air, so he reached into the drawer under the amidships bunks, took out a sweat shirt, and pulled it over his head. It felt good.

Scotty had taken time to dry off the books and binoculars he had brought from the deck before he changed his own clothes. By the time he was dressed in dry shorts and sweater, Rick had the alcohol stove going and water heating for coffee.

"Know where we are?" Rick asked casually.

"Sure. We're—" Scotty stopped. "For Pete's sake! I didn't make the connection at first. We're in Swamp Creek, where that man got snatched by a flying saucer!"

"Right. Worried?"

Scotty grinned. "Any flying saucer that can navigate in this weather is welcome to what it gets. How's the anchor?"

"Holding," Rick said. "I hope." He looked out the galley window and watched the shore. It changed position as the boat moved, but that was only because the houseboat was swinging at anchor. "Seems all right," he added.

Ten minutes later coffee was ready. The boys sat at the dinette table and sipped with relish, listening to the storm outside. It seemed to be increasing in intensity.

"Picking up," Scotty said. "The guidebook wasn't kidding when it said 'sudden and severe summer storms lash the bay.'"

"Wonder how long they last?" Rick asked.

"Hard to say. Perhaps an hour."

The houseboat jerked suddenly. Rick jumped to his feet. "Did you feel that?"

The boat heeled under the lash of wind. Rick peeled off his sweat shirt. "Feels as though the anchor dragged a little. I'm going out and let out more scope. We can't take a chance of drifting in this wind."

"I'll go," Scotty offered.

"No. I put the anchor down. It's my fault if it slips. Stand by."

Rick pulled the cabin door open and winced at the

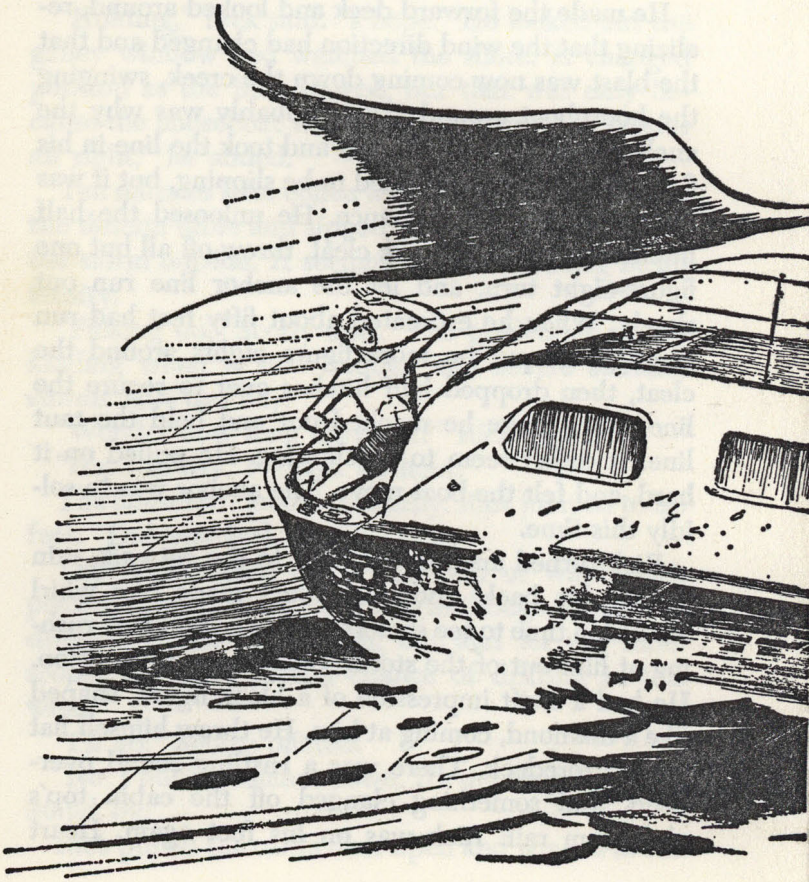
blast of raindrops, like heavy buckshot on his face and body. For a moment he hesitated, then realized the sooner he got it over with, the better. He hurried to the catwalk and swung down it, meanwhile estimating his distances. He could let out another fifty feet of anchor line without getting the boat too near shore. The more anchor line out, the better the anchor could hold.

He made the forward deck and looked around, realizing that the wind direction had changed and that the blast was now coming down the creek, swinging the houseboat around. That probably was why the anchor had shifted. He knelt and took the line in his fingers. It no longer seemed to be slipping, but it was better not to take a chance. He unloosed the half hitches that held it to the cleat, threw off all but one figure-eight turn, and let the anchor line run out slowly. When he estimated about fifty feet had run through, he put on more figure eights around the cleat, then dropped half hitches over to secure the line. Once more he reached out and held the taut line. It didn't seem to be slipping. He pulled on it hard, and felt the boat move. The anchor was in solidly this time.

Rick turned and started back to the catwalk, rain lashing his back. Sudden instinct made him whirl around in time to see something huge and black rushing at him out of the storm. Rain blurred his vision. He had a swift impression of a black figure, shaped like a diamond, coming at him. He threw himself flat on the foredeck. There was a rustling sound overhead, and something clanged off the cabin top's aluminum rail. Rick was on his feet again. Heart

pounding, he looked around. There was nothing but rain and wind. He stood upright and looked across the cabin top. For an instant he glimpsed a black object above the canopy over the rear cockpit, then that, too, was lost in the rain.

Shaken, Rick made his way back to the cabin, entered, closed the door, and leaned against it. Scotty looked up, and was on his feet in an instant.

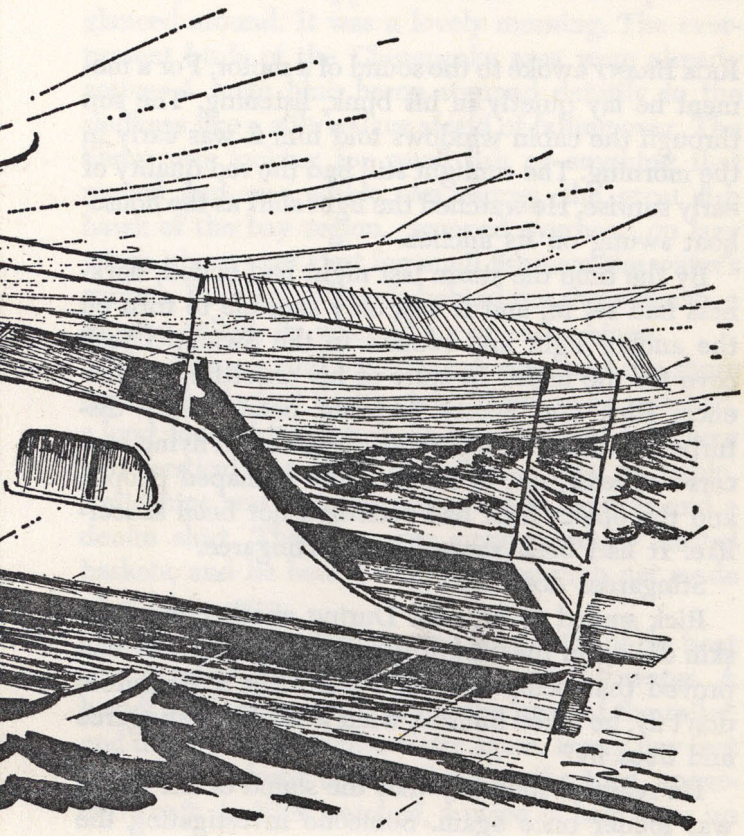


"Rick! What happened? You're white as a sheet!" he exclaimed.

"Saw one," Rick managed. He was still shaking. "It went right over the boat. I think it hit the upper rail. We'll check later. But it wasn't a flying saucer. I'm sure of that."

"What was it?" Scotty demanded.

"A flying stingaree!"



CHAPTER III

Orvil Harris, Crabber

RICK BRANT awoke to the sound of a motor. For a moment he lay quietly in his bunk, listening. The sun through the cabin windows told him it was early in the morning. The sunlight still had the red quality of early sunrise. He watched the light shift as the houseboat swung on its anchor.

By the time the storm last night had ended, darkness had set in, and it was only sensible to turn on the anchor light and remain in the Swamp Creek cove for the night. In spite of his unsettling experience, Rick and Scotty had not been deeply disturbed. Neither he nor Scotty believed in flying saucers—at least, not in saucers that kidnaped people, and the object Rick had seen had not been saucer-like. It had been shaped like a stingaree.

Stingarees don't fly.

Rick smiled to himself. During another vacation, skin diving in the Virgin Islands, he and Scotty had proved that octopuses don't wail. But if stingarees don't fly, he asked himself, what looks like a stingaree and *does* fly?

He realized suddenly that the sound of the motor was louder once again. Someone investigating the

houseboat? He swung out of bed. The cool air of morning was in sharp contrast to the warmth of his sleeping bag. Quickly he slipped into shorts and sweat shirt. As he opened the cabin door, he heard the slap of bare feet on the deck behind him and turned to see Scotty regain his balance after dropping from the upper bunk.

"Go ahead," Scotty called. "Be right with you."

"Okay." Rick stepped out into the cockpit and glanced around. It was a lovely morning. The ever-present birds of the Chesapeake area were already active. A huge blue heron stepped daintily in the shallows like a stilt walker afraid of falling over. The heron was looking for small fish or anything that moved and was edible. An osprey, the great fish hawk of the bay region, swooped overhead on lazy wings, sharp eyes alert for small fish near the water's surface. In the pine woods behind the shore marsh, a bluejay called, its voice like a squeaky hinge.

The motor sound was distant now, and the shore upstream blocked Rick's view. Then, as he watched, a long, low, white motorboat came into sight. Its bow was vertical, its sides low. There was no cabin. Amidships was a single man, clad in overalls and a denim shirt. The man was surrounded by bushel baskets, and he held a long-handled crab net made of chicken wire.

Rick watched with interest. On one side of the boat was a roller that extended out over the water. A heavy cord came out of the water, crossed the roller, and dipped back into the water again. Every few feet there was a chunk of something on the cord, apparently bait. As Rick watched, a piece of bait came up

with a crab clinging to it. The net swooped and the crab was caught, pulled inboard, and dumped into a bushel basket with one fluid motion. The crabber never took his eyes from the cord. The boat continued in a straight line.

Scotty came out on deck and joined Rick. The boys watched in silence while the man caught a dozen crabs, then picked one from the bait and flipped it into the water.

"Too small, I guess," Rick commented.

"Must be. Where does the line go?"

Rick pointed. A gallon oilcan, painted blue and white, bobbed gently in the creek. "That's where he's heading."

The crabber approached the can, then flipped the line off the roller. Using a lever next to him, he turned the boat and headed toward another can some distance away. A quick pull with a boat hook and the line attached to the can was placed over the roller. Crabs appeared, holding onto the bait as the boat moved along the new line. Rick counted. The crabber was getting about one crab for every three baits.

Scotty leaned over the cockpit rail. "There's the end of his line, over near shore. He'll pass close to us."

"That's why the motor sounded loud," Rick guessed. "He moves from one line to another. Last time he came by the boat he woke me up."

"Same here." Scotty nodded.

The crabber moved methodically, his boat proceeding at a steady pace toward the houseboat. As he came abreast, he called, "Mornin'."

The boys returned the greeting.

"Looks like a good catch," Scotty called.

"Fair. Only fair." The crabber scooped up a huge blue crab from almost under their noses and went on his way.

"If it's only fair now, what must it be like when it's good?" Rick asked with a grin.

"Two crabs on every hunk of bait," Scotty said. "You count crabs and I'll make coffee."

"That's my boy," Rick said approvingly.

Scotty went into the cabin and left Rick watching the crabber. Rick tried to figure out all the details. After a short time he concluded that the floats were attached to anchors of some kind. The anchors kept the crab line on the bottom, except when it was running over the roller. He also saw that there were no hooks or other gadgets. The crabs were caught simply because they refused to let go of the bait.

The aroma of coffee drifted through the cabin door, and Rick wondered why it is that coffee, bacon, and other breakfast scents are so much more tantalizing on the water.

The crabber approached on the leg of his journey closest to the boat. On impulse, Rick called, "Come aboard and have some coffee?"

The man grinned. Without missing his smooth swing at a rising crab, he called back, "Don't mind. That coffee smell was drivin' me nigh crazy. Be back when I finish this line."

Rick leaned into the cabin. "Company for coffee, Scotty."

"Heard you. Got another cup all ready. In here or out there?"

"Out here. It's too nice to be inside."

In a few moments the motorboat, which turned out to be as long as the houseboat, came alongside. Rick took the line thrown by the crabber and made it fast so that the crab boat would drift astern. He looked into the boat with interest. Covers on four baskets showed that the crabber had collected four bushels of crabs. A fifth and sixth basket were half full, one with very large crabs, the other with smaller ones.

The crabber swung aboard. He was of medium height, with light-blue eyes set in a tanned and weather-beaten face. Rick guessed his age to be somewhere in the mid-forties. He smiled, showing even teeth that were glaringly white in his tanned face.

"Name's Orvil Harris," he announced.

"Rick Brant." Rick shook hands. "That's Don Scott coming out with the coffee."

Scotty put down the coffeepot and mugs he was carrying and shook hands. "Call me Scotty, Mr. Harris. How do you like your coffee?"

"Strong and often," Harris replied. "Plain black. Call me Orvil."

Like all visitors, Harris was interested in the houseboat. "Been hopin' for a look inside," he said in his slurred Eastern Shore accent. "Almost gave up hope. You get up late, seems like."

Rick glanced at the sun. "Must be all of seven o'clock. You call that late?"

"Been here since four. It's late for me."

Rick showed Orvil Harris through the boat, then sat with him and Scotty in the cockpit, sipping steam-

ing coffee. The crabber talked willingly about his business.

"Not much profit," he reported, "but it beats workin'."

After hearing about a crabber's life, rising in the middle of the night, rain or shine, working crab lines and hauling baskets around until noon, Rick wondered what Harris would consider hard work. Having spent a dollar for six steamed crabs a few nights before, he was also amazed to hear the crabber report that he received only six dollars a bushel for "jumbo" crabs and three dollars a bushel for "culls," or medium ones. All under four and a half inches from tip to tip were thrown back.

Rick waited a courteous length of time before asking the question that had been on his mind since hearing the crabber's name. "Are you any relation to Link Harris?"

"Second cousin." The blue eyes examined him with new interest. "Where'd you hear about Link?"

"At the Narrows," Scotty replied. "We were talking about flying saucers."

"Flyin' catfish," Harris said scornfully. "You swallow that yarn?"

"Didn't you?" Rick asked quickly.

"Not any. That why you picked this creek to anchor in when there's so many nicer ones upstream?"

Scotty explained. "We ducked in here to get out of that squall last night. We didn't exactly pick it. Afterward, we realized where we were."

"Why don't you believe the story about Link Harris?" Rick wanted to know.

"Oh, I believe some of it." The crabber took out a

blackened, much-used pipe and stoked it. "Link disappeared, all right. We found his boat yonder." He pointed to a spot on the marshy shore.

"He didn't drown?" Rick pressed.

Harris shrugged. "Not very likely. We'd have found his body. Way the tides were that day, there was no ebb tide strong enough to carry a body out into deep water. The creek was clear. We'd have seen him."

"Then where did he go?" Scotty demanded.

"Can't say. When he disappeared, I went to Baltimore and bought every book on flyin' saucers I could lay hands on. All I know for sure is that what folks have been seein' around here ain't saucers. Shape's wrong, color's wrong, and they don't move the way the books say."

"Would you say they were diamond-shaped, dark in color, with tails?" Rick asked carefully.

Harris stopped with a match halfway to his pipe. "I would. For sure. When'd you see one?"

"Last night. Right here."

"Mmmmm." Harris got the pipe going well and threw the match into the water. "I've never seen one close. Hoped to. That's why I crab this creek. Would you say it was big enough to catch a man?"

Rick shook his head. "I didn't get a very long look, but I'd say definitely not. Unless it had some kind of powerful motor I couldn't see or hear."

Harris puffed silently.

"Any theories?" Scotty asked.

"Not one. I'm barren as the flats in winter."

Rick finished his coffee and put the mug down on

the cabin top. "Would Link have gone away of his own accord?"

"I wouldn't think so." Harris accepted more coffee from Scotty. "But let's keep one foot anchored. Who knows what's in a man's mind? Any man? Sometimes there's a deep channel full of black water, and nothin' to make you suspect it. Maybe Link did walk off. It would be the easiest explanation—if you hadn't seen somethin' last night. I was about to give up. Now I'm not so sure. What you saw came from somewhere, and it was goin' somewhere. If we could find out whence and whither, so to speak, we might have an idea of what happened to Link."

Harris drew erect. "Speakin' of whence and whither, what's your destination?"

"We're visiting a friend," Rick answered. "He lives on Martins Creek on the south side of the river. Name is Ames."

Harris nodded. "I know who he is. Washington man. Has a summer place."

"You've met him?" Scotty inquired.

"So to speak. We've howdy'd, but we haven't shook."

Rick smothered a grin at the picturesque phrase.

"I'd better get back to crabs," Harris said. "I'm mighty grateful for the hospitality. You get to town, look me up, and give me a chance to return it." He shook hands with both boys, pulled his boat alongside, and stepped aboard. In a short time, he was running the crab lines again.

"Interesting," Rick said noncommittally.

Scotty chuckled. "Here we go again. Sherlock

Brant's got his teeth into a nice fat mystery. Good-by vacation."

Rick had to grin. "It's not that bad," he said defensively. "I just thought we might sniff around a little."

"That's what I thought you thought. Come on, Hawkshaw. Let's get some bacon and eggs on the fire and haul anchor."

"Okay." Rick checked the chart. "We're only about twenty minutes' run from Steve's place. If we eat here, he won't think he has to feed us breakfast."

"Considerate," Scotty agreed, grinning. "I can see you now. You walk up the dock, shake hands, and say, 'Glad to see you, Steve. Don't bother about breakfast. We've eaten. By the way, have you had any trouble with flying stingarees?' "

Rick grinned back. "Not bad predicting. Actually, I was going to wait for the right opportunity, then By the way, when does the hunting season open for say, 'Wonderful hunting and fishing country, Steve. flying stingarees?' "

Scotty laughed. "Okay. Only let's get going. I want to see how he answers!"

CHAPTER IV

Steve's Place

A RED buoy marked the entrance to Martins Creek. Rick, at the helm, passed it close to starboard and headed into the center of the creek. Past the wooded shores of the creek entrance, he could see fields, obviously tended, and more woods.

"Steve's place should be the second on the left," Scotty said. "The first house with a dock."

"Use the binoculars," Rick suggested. "We should be able to see it when we round the next bend."

The houseboat passed the first house, a small, modern dwelling set close to the water. A rowboat was hauled up on the shore. The creek rounded a wooded promontory and the next house came into view. Steve's!

Rick's eager eyes saw an attractive farmhouse, set well back from the water in a frame of willows and white oaks. There was an acre of green lawn in front of the house, the lawn running down to the water's edge. A small dock jutted out into the creek. Tied to one side of it was a sturdy runabout with an outboard motor.

"Pretty," Scotty approved.

Rick nodded. The farmhouse was half frame, half

white brick, with a slate roof. It was apparently only one story high. On impulse, Rick gave a long blast on the boat horn.

The front door opened and a man looked out, then walked swiftly down to the dock, waving. The boys waved back.

"Get the lines ready," Rick requested. "I'll back in."

He throttled down and let the houseboat move slowly past the dock while he yelled a greeting to Steve Ames. There were no obstacles, and just enough room for the boat. He reversed his motors and threw his helm hard over, backing slowly into position. Scotty stood ready with a line, which he heaved to Steve. Then Scotty ran lightly to the foredeck and got the bowline ready. The houseboat nestled against the dock smoothly and Rick killed the motors. Then the three old friends were shaking hands and grinning from ear to ear.

"I've been watching since yesterday afternoon," Steve told them. "That storm last night worried me some. I didn't know whether you could ride it out or not."

"No trouble," Rick said. "We ran into Swamp Creek on the north side of the river and spent the night there." He watched the agent's face closely, but Steve didn't react.

"Come on in," Steve invited. "Coffee's on. Had your breakfast?"

"We ate before hauling anchor," Scotty said, grinning.

Steve Ames knew the boys well. "Something's up," he stated. "Rick is watching me like a suspicious sand

crab and your tone of voice is wrong, Scotty. Coffee first, then talk. Come on."

Rick shook his head in admiration. It was impossible to catch Steve off guard. The agent had a deceptive appearance, athletic and good looking, with the forthright friendliness of a college undergraduate. But his trained eyes and ears missed nothing.

Steve's living room was attractive and comfortable, with bookshelves between the windows, a stone fireplace, a striped rug, and deep, restful chairs. There were lamps in exactly the right positions for reading.

The agent brought in a tray of coffee cups, with a pot of coffee and platter of doughnuts. "Even if you've eaten breakfast, you can manage a couple of these." He poured coffee and made sure the boys were comfortable, then sank into an armchair and looked at them quizzically.

"All right. Out with it."

Rick chuckled. "You're too sharp," he accused. "We had a plan all cooked up. I was going to comment on the fishing and hunting, and then ask—very innocently—when the season for flying stingarees opened."

The agent's eyebrows went up. "Flying stingarees? Swimming ones, yes. Open season any time. Flying ones, no. What is all this?"

"Rick saw one last night in the storm," Scotty explained.

"That's not all," Rick added. He told of their conversation at the Narrows and of the talk with Orvil Harris that morning. "So there's something fishy

around here besides crabs and rockfish. We thought you might know," he concluded.

Steve shook his head with obvious admiration. "Leave it to the Spindrift twins! If there's a mystery afoot, you'll unearth it. Nope, lads. Never heard of your flying stingarees, or flying saucers, either. But that's not surprising. I'm down here mostly on weekends, sometimes with a friend or two, and the only local folks we see are at the store or gas station. Usually I'm in too much of a rush for small talk. I don't get the local papers, and when I listen to the radio or watch TV, it's either a Washington or Baltimore station. So I'm not in touch with local events."

"Anyway," Rick said, "stingarees don't fly."

Steve had been in the Virgin Islands, too, and had been involved in the adventure of *The Wailing Octopus*. "You found out that the octopus didn't wail," he reminded them, "but for a while it looked as though you'd found a new species. Maybe this is the same thing. What makes the stingaree fly?"

"It would be fun to find out," Scotty admitted.

"You'll have time to make a start, and I won't be in the way with plans for fishing or crabbing. I'm sorry, boys, but I'll be in and out of Washington for a few days. Got a hot case working that I can't leave for long."

The boys protested. "You deserve some vacation," Rick said hotly.

Steve held up his hand. "Whoa! I'm getting a vacation. This case should be settled in three or four days, and I'll be with you. Meanwhile, you move in here. You can drive me to the airport at Cambridge and pick me up when I come back. That will leave you a

car, and you can use the motorboat for exploring or for fishing. If you feel like skin diving, you can try for rock or hardheads off the northern tip of Taylors Island, right at the mouth of the river. Did you bring gear?"

"The whole set," Rick replied. "Lungs, compressors, guns, and even suits."

"You won't need suits. The bay is shallow and warm. At night you can relax right here. Plenty of books, TV, radio, or a chessboard. If it gets cool, there's wood for the fireplace."

"Sounds good," Scotty agreed. "But we wanted you with us."

"I will be. Before the weekend."

"When do you have to leave?" Rick asked.

"Three this afternoon. I have an evening meeting at headquarters. I'll be back on the four-o'clock flight tomorrow afternoon, and, with luck, I won't have to go again. If I do, it will be only for a day."

"Okay," Rick said reluctantly. "We'll settle in, but we won't move in. We'll sleep on the boat. No need to use up your linens and stuff when we have sleeping bags if the weather is cold and cotton blankets when it's warm. Besides, housekeeping is easier on the boat."

Steve grinned. "I'll bet it is. If I know you two, you eat out of cans and never use a dish if you can help it. Your idea of washing a coffee cup is to hold it under running water or to dip it in the bay. Wait until your mother and the girls join you. Life will undergo a drastic change."

"Don't rub it in," Scotty said ruefully. "Now, how about showing us over this estate of yours?"

Steve was pleased by the request. He obviously was proud of his creekside home, and with reason. There were fifty acres of land, mostly oak forest, with a private access road. Electric power came in from the public power lines, but he had a gasoline generator in case of failure, and his own artesian well. He explained:

"The house has been completely remodeled, but it's really quite old. When it was built, there was only a wagon track. In those days, the rivers and creeks were the highways, and the people traveled by boat. You'll see old mansions fronting on the rivers here. The back doors face the roads. Water transport was the reason. The landed gentry had barges rowed by slaves. The poor folks rowed their own. Of course, there were plenty of sailing craft, too. There still are."

The creek in front of the house proved deep enough for swimming, and the three went for a dip. Rick tasted the water. It was salty, but not like the ocean. The backwaters of the bay were brackish, with low-salt content.

In the afternoon, the boys—somewhat reluctantly—got into what they referred to as "shore-going clothes." These consisted of slacks, sport shirts, light casual jackets, and loafers. Steve had a bag packed. They got into his car, a late-model convertible, and headed for Cambridge.

The plane, a small twin-engine craft, was late coming from Norfolk. By the time Steve was en route to Washington, it was nearly the dinner hour.

"Eat out?" Rick suggested.

"Absolutely. More crab cakes?"

Rick shook his head. "Crab imperial. Maybe some steamed clams."

"You're making me hungry," Scotty protested. "I'll say one thing for the bay area. The folks eat well. How about some terrapin stew?"

"Crab imperial," Rick said again. "Baked in a crab shell. Lots of mayonnaise, paprika, and butter. I'll have a hearts of romaine salad on the side, with oil-and-vinegar dressing. Maybe tarragon vinegar. A few French fries, too. But first, a couple of dozen steamed clams. What do they call 'em here? Manos, pronounced Man! Oh!"

"Just tell me where," Scotty begged. "Say no more."

"How about that place we passed just before we got to Cambridge? The one built like a Colonial mansion."

"The Bay Gourmet," Scotty remembered. "Okay. You're driving."

Rick put the convertible in gear and moved out of the airport driveway onto the highway. "We're on our own," he said. "It's up to us to entertain ourselves. But food isn't enough. Man cannot live by bread alone, the Scriptures say."

"I knew it." Scotty slumped down in the seat and sighed. "Since man cannot live by bread alone, his life must be filled with other things. And guess what things!"

Rick smiled in anticipation. "Uh-huh. Flying stingarees."

CHAPTER V

The Face Is Familiar

THE BAY GOURMET was all that its outside appearance promised. A waiter, elderly and courteous, his voice soft with the Eastern Shore accent, led them to a table in a main dining room that was like something out of early American history, Maryland style. The Maryland colony had not been poor, and many of its settlers had been of the English nobility. They had brought with them furniture, paintings, and chinaware from England and France, and their homes were gracious and livable.

The restaurant followed the pattern. Rick wouldn't have been surprised to see the ghost of Lord Baltimore walk through one of the arches.

The boys pored over the menus and finally settled on crab gumbo, clam fritters, and crab imperial. While they waited, Rick opened the subject that was on his mind. "How does a stingaree fly?"

Scotty shrugged. "Easy. He climbs to the top of a tall tree, spreads his wings, and takes off. He flaps his wings to gain altitude. He steers with his tail."

"I'm serious," Rick said sternly, his eyes twinkling.

"So am I. Alternate method: the stingaree climbs on a fence and lassos a passing airplane. Or catches a ride on an eagle's tail feathers. Take your choice."

"I've got a better way. The stingaree poses for his picture. The picture is used as a model for making a kite, probably of black plastic. The kite gets flown in the wind."

Scotty stared. "Maybe—just maybe—you've got something there. The stingaree shape would make a good kite. Could what you saw have been a kite?"

"It's possible." Rick nodded. "The wind was funneling down the creek pretty fast, and it would have carried a big kite. There's only one small difficulty. Why launch a kite that has no string?"

"You certain it didn't have a string?"

"In that wind, the string would have had to be a cable. I'd have seen it, and maybe felt it. The kite—stingaree, that is—just missed. Of course, the string might have broken."

"There's another small difficulty," Scotty said thoughtfully. "If it was a kite, where was it launched and why?"

"Up the creek somewhere. We don't know what's up there."

"True. From the looks, I'd say not much. Maybe some opossums and muskrats, which don't launch kites."

Rick spread butter liberally on a hot biscuit. "We can always take a look."

"We can. In Steve's boat, the creek would be only a few minutes away."

Rick savored the biscuit and took another bite that

finished it. "I could eat a ton of these. What else would make a stingaree fly?"

Scotty accepted a pitcher of honey from the waiter and poured a disgraceful amount on a biscuit. "How about some kind of experimental aircraft?"

Rick shook his head. "The stingaree was vertical. An experimental plane in that position would have to be rising straight up, and this creature was traveling almost horizontally, with the wind. Besides, I heard no motor or any kind of power plant."

"You're as lucid as lamplight, ol' buddy. You explain everything—except what made that stingaree fly."

Rick grinned wryly. "I'll never get a swelled head with you sticking pins in it."

"Only carrying out my proper function," Scotty said virtuously.

The first course had arrived. Crab gumbo turned out to be spicy, hot, and very, very good.

"I may decide to live here," Rick said as he spooned up the last mouthful.

"I'm a native already," Scotty stated. "The Chesapeake Bay is my home, if the rest of the meal lives up to the soup."

The clam fritters were light, crisp, and succulent. "Meet a brand-new Marylander," Scotty announced.

Rick started to reply, then stopped as a party of three entered the dining room and were shown to a table nearby. He knew one of the men, but he couldn't remember where they had met.

"Scotty," he said softly, "look around at the group

that just came in. Who's the man in the plaid jacket? I know him, but I can't remember."

Scotty's napkin "accidentally" fell to the floor. He had to turn to pick it up. When he straightened, he shook his head. "The face is familiar, but I can't place it."

Rick studied the man through half-lowered lids, not wanting to be rude by staring openly. The familiar face was lean, and lined. It was not a pleasant face, although its owner would be described as a "distinguished-looking man of middle age." The lips were not especially thin, but they were tightly held. The chin was firm, with a shadow of beard even though the man looked freshly shaven. His hair was crisp, wavy, and pure white.

"Could be of French or Italian ancestry," Rick said. "Or, maybe, Spanish or Portuguese. Anyway, I'd vote for Southern European."

"On the button," Scotty agreed.

Rick's eyes dropped as the man looked their way. The eyes were dark brown, he saw, with heavy lids. The eyebrows, in startling contrast to the white hair, were dark.

The boy looked up again, his glance guarded. The man was smartly, but conservatively dressed, in dark-blue slacks, white sport shirt open at the collar, and a linen sport jacket of subdued plaid, much like those affected by some Ivy Leaguers.

The other two men were not familiar. One was almost bald, with a wisp of sandy hair combed in a pitiful and useless attempt to conceal the baldness. He wore glasses with clear plastic frames. They sat on

a nose that could have served as a golf-ball model. His lips were almost nonexistent, and his chin receded so far that Rick wondered why he didn't conceal it with a beard. He seemed like a complete nonentity. In contrast to the white-haired man's style of dress, the nondescript man wore a rumpled black suit of synthetic fabric, a regular white shirt, and a tie that a color-blind old aunt might have given him for Christmas two decades past.

The third man was the largest of the three, with an

expressionless face and eyes that never stopped moving. He sat motionless in his chair, apparently completely relaxed. Rick knew that the relaxation was deceptive. Steve Ames at times looked relaxed like

that, but it was the same kind of quietness one finds in a coiled spring that has not yet been released. The man had brown hair, light-brown eyes, and a heavy tan. He spoke only twice while Rick watched, and then only to give orders to the waiter. The other two men talked steadily, but in such low tones that the boys could not hear words.

The crab imperial arrived, and the riddle of the familiar face was forgotten in a new taste treat. After one luscious bite, Rick said, "I'm going to bring the folks here and order a duplicate of this meal. They'll go crazy."

Excellent food was a tradition in the Brant household. Mrs. Brant was a superb cook, and both she and Hartson Brant had taught the Spindrift young people to appreciate a well-prepared dish.

"I'll order the same thing just to keep them company," Scotty offered.

"Generous, always generous," Rick replied. "You'll eat the same thing even if you have to force it down."

"I'll do just that," Scotty agreed. "Remember where you've seen yonder diner?"

Rick shook his head. "Not yet. It's an odd trio. He's the dominant one in the group. The bald one looks like a servant, and the big one like a police dog on guard."

"Bodyguard?" Scotty asked quickly.

"Maybe. Or, perhaps, a chauffeur. It's hard to say."

"Do you suppose the white-haired man is just a familiar type and we've never seen him before?"

"No. It isn't that. I know I've seen him before, but I can't tell you where or when."

The boys finished the meal with a scoop of lemon sherbet and rose reluctantly. "We'll be back," Rick promised.

"That we will," Scotty echoed.

The old waiter bowed them to the door. As they were leaving, Rick paused. "Do you know that white-haired man at the table near us?"

"Why, sir, that's Mr. Merlin. Summer folks, you might say. He bought one of the old mansions. This is his second summer with us."

"Which one of the old mansions?" Scotty asked.

"Calvert's Favor. It's in the guidebooks, sir. We have copies for sale if you'd like one."

"We have one," Rick replied. "Thank you."

"Not at all, gentlemen. Hurry back."

The boys walked into a lovely summer night, with a newly risen moon, near fullness, floating just above the horizon. By unspoken agreement, they put the top down on Steve's convertible. Rick was just snapping it in place when he sensed someone standing next to him. He turned, to face the big man of the trio.

The man got to the point without preliminaries. "You were asking the waiter about Mr. Merlin."

"We thought he looked familiar, but we couldn't place him," Rick replied. "We meant no discourtesy."

"I'm sure you didn't," the man said smoothly. He didn't smile, even though his voice was pleasant enough. "Mr. Merlin is a very prominent man. He comes down here to get away from people. Naturally, he doesn't welcome inquiries. I'm sure you understand."

"We have no intention of intruding," Rick stated coolly. "As I said, he looked familiar. We merely asked out of curiosity."

"You're not local boys." It was a statement.

"No. We're visitors."

"The local people have learned not to ask questions about Mr. Merlin. I suggest you follow their example." The man turned and walked back into the restaurant.

The boys stared after him, openmouthed.

"If that poor soul only knew," Scotty said, "he picked the best possible way to arouse our curiosity."

"I haven't been warned so politely in a long time," Rick agreed. "Come on, son. Let's head for Martins Creek." He slid behind the wheel while Scotty got into the passenger side.

Rick started the car and listened to it purr for a moment. "I noticed that Steve has quite a few books about the Eastern Shore on his bookshelves," he said casually.

"So did I. Including one called *Tidewater Maryland.* Lots of pictures of the old estates in that one."

"Be interesting if there was a picture of Calvert's Favor, wouldn't it?"

"Interesting and maybe informative. Well, are we going to sit here all night?"

"Nope. We're going to Steve's. Looks as if we have a small research project."

"To be followed by a second project," Scotty added. "First we read up on Calvert's Favor, and then we find it and look it over."

Rick grinned. "Nobody warns Scotty with impunity."

"But nobody!" Scotty said cheerfully.

CHAPTER VI

The Saucer Sighters

"We shoot a line straight north," Rick explained "for a distance of about twenty miles. Then we start asking questions. If we get affirmative answers, we head north again for another ten miles and repeat the process. We do this until we come to an area where saucers have not been sighted. Okay?"

Scotty nodded. "Okay. There is only one tiny flaw in this plan. If we head straight north, we drop Steve's car into the Little Choptank. If we cross that safely, we'll get wet in the main Choptank."

Rick sighed. "If there is anything I detest, loathe, and despise, it is people who get up in the morning feeling full of humor. We will go to Cambridge, missing the Little Choptank, and cross the Choptank on the bridge. Route 50 goes almost straight north. Is that more precise and acceptable, Donald?"

"It is indeed, Richard. I'm a stickler for accuracy."

"You're a stickler in the mud. Let's get a notebook and start traveling."

A conference after dinner the night before had resulted in a plan of action. The boys had decided to reduce all the rumors about flying saucers to statis-

tics that could be examined to see what elements the various sightings had in common. The way to obtain the statistics was through interviews.

The problem of the white-haired man with the familiar face still remained. Steve's books had disclosed that Calvert's Favor was famous, that it had been so named by the original settler because he had been granted the land by Lord Calvert, that it had changed hands only twice in more than a century. What the books didn't give was its location. The place was identified only as "a quiet creek, entirely within the original land grant." There was no mention of a Calvert Creek in the vicinity. They decided to put the question of its location aside until Steve's return.

It was a lovely morning. The convertible hummed smoothly over the blacktop roads to Cambridge, onto Route 50, across the Choptank River and north. Rick braked to a stop as the highway met the turnoff to Easton. "Think we're far enough north?"

Scotty had been consulting a road map. He shook his head. "Not yet. Easton is almost due east of Knapps Narrows, and we know the saucers have been sighted there. Better go on to Wye Mills."

"Okay." The road was dual-lane cement, now, and Rick relaxed while the car sped northward. "Odd name, Wye Mills. Lots of Wyes around here. Three Wye Rivers on the chart, a Wye Landing, and a famous old Wye Oak."

"Sounds like a song," Scotty said. "Wye, tell me Wye, are there saucers in the sky—"

"Please," Rick protested, "I'm in pain."

Route 50 turned at Wye Mills, leading to the

Chesapeake Bay Bridge that crossed the bay to Annapolis. There was a gas station and lunch stand at the intersection. Rick pulled in and drifted up to the gas pump. "Fill it up, please. Any bottles of Coke around?"

"In the machine." The attendant pointed to the red automatic vendor.

The boys equipped themselves with Cokes and walked back to watch the attendant fill the tank. "We must be somewhere near where all those flying saucers were sighted," Rick remarked.

The attendant looked up. "Farther south. Never heard of anyone this far north seein' one. They see plenty down toward Cambridge. Ask me, they're seein' spots in front of their eyes."

The boys exchanged glances. When the car was ready, Rick turned and started south again. "See any stores on the way where we could ask again?"

"There's a restaurant. I saw two grocery stores, too, but from the way the attendant talked, we'll have to get closer to Cambridge." Scotty was making a note in their notebook.

Five miles back toward home, Rick stopped at another gas station and asked the attendant to look at the oil. None was needed, so the boys bought another pair of Cokes and engaged the man in conversation.

"Ever see any flying saucers in this area?" Rick asked.

"Nope. My brother did though, late one afternoon when he was on duty."

Scotty took out the notebook. "We're trying to get some information about them for a story we're writing. Do you remember when it was?"

"Let's see. I was workin' in the evenin' that day, so it must have been a Saturday. Last month, it was. Oh, I recall it now. Next day I took the kids to my mother's. It was her birthday. That would make it the tenth."

"Where was your brother when he saw it?" Rick queried.

"Pumpin' gas. Right here. He said it sort of came up over the trees, glittering like fire." The attendant pointed to a patch of trees down the road. The direction was almost directly southwest.

Scotty scribbled in the notebook. "Any other details you remember? What time in the afternoon was it?"

"Between four and five. Can't say exactly. He was still buzzin' when I came on duty at six. Wanted to call the newspapers, but I talked him out of it. People would think he was a fool."

"Did you?" Rick asked quietly.

"Nope. I know Chick. He's got a straight head on him. It may not have been a flyin' saucer, but you can bet it wasn't anythin' common, or anythin' he'd seen before."

"Score one," Scotty said triumphantly as they drove off.

"One flying saucer doesn't make a Martian invasion," Rick reminded him. "Let's keep it up."

By lunchtime they had interviewed a dozen people who claimed to have seen flying saucers. All details of the sightings had been noted in Scotty's book. During lunch, at a small restaurant in the old town of Oxford, they scored three more times after interviews with fishermen.

After lunch, they crossed the Choptank and headed south to the little town of Vienna. From there the route led to the shore town of Elliott, back to Vienna, and past the corner of Delaware to Salisbury, a good-sized town on the Maryland Eastern Shore.

There was a newspaper office in Salisbury. A chat with the editor and a quick skim through the back files added more data to the growing list. Rick had a hunch there was a pattern shaping up, but he could not be sure until the information was all laid out for examination.

By the time the boys met Steve at the small airport, both Rick and Scotty had writer's cramp, and the notebook was nearly used up. They had recorded over half a hundred sightings.

Steve listened to a report of their day with an appreciative smile. "Nothing like a mystery for keeping you two out of mischief," he told them. "Want to eat out? Or cook a steak in the yard?"

"Eat out," Scotty said promptly.

"We can get steak at home," Rick added. "But not Chesapeake Bay clam fritters or Maryland crab cakes."

Steve had a favorite place of his own, a small, nondescript joint called "Louie's Crab House" up the Choptank River, near the town of Denton. There, on wooden trestle tables covered with brown wrapping paper, he introduced them to a favorite Chesapeake Bay pastime known as a "crab feast."

The waiter set wooden blocks in front of them, with a round piece of hardwood, a fork, and a sharp paring knife. A stack of paper napkins was supplied,

and individual pots of melted butter completed the setting.

The boys waited impatiently, hungry, but trusting Steve's word that the result was worth the wait. The waiter reappeared carrying a huge tray, stacked with a towering pyramid of whole crabs, steaming and red, coated with the spices in which they had been cooked. Placing the tray on the table, the waiter asked, "Anything else?"

Scotty said, dazed, "I don't believe there's anything else left in the kitchen. We have all the crabs in the world right here."

"Only three dozen," the waiter said. "Jumbos, of course. You want anything, you yell."

Unidentified flying objects were forgotten as Steve initiated them into the proper method of eating fresh crab. It turned out to be quite an art, but one that they mastered quickly. Soon all three of them were munching succulent back-fin crab meat drenched in fresh butter. The wooden block served as an anvil, and the round hardwood piece as a hammer for cracking claws. The paring knife was used for trimming and for scooping out delicious bits of meat. The fork was utilized to persuade small tidbits to leave their shell cages. Three or four napkins were used between each tidbit to mop buttery hands, and even chins, down which the butter sometimes dripped. It was a feast, indeed.

"If I hadn't been a heavy eater before, I'd be one after this," Scotty observed happily.

"Beats hunting flying stingarees," Rick agreed. "Pass another crab, please."

Not until the table had been cleared by the waiter,

who simply removed the utensils and tray, then wrapped up all the shells in the brown paper and carried it off, did the conversation return to the mystery.

Rick hadn't told Steve of last night's meeting with the white-haired man or of the thinly veiled warning. He described them now in detail.

"Odd," Steve said. "This familiar face needs identifying. No normal person worries about anyone asking casual questions. That's a sure mark of insecurity. In other words, the man is afraid. People who are afraid often have something to hide. Do you have any reason to think he may be tied up with the flying stingarees or saucers?"

"None at all," Rick answered.

"Do you know where Calvert's Favor is?" Scotty asked. "The location wasn't given in your books. There was quite a lot about the plantation house."

"No, never heard of the place. But we'll find out when we pass through Cambridge. I know a man there who knows everything about this area." Steve held out his hand. "Let's see your notebook."

Scotty handed it over. The young agent leafed through it rapidly. "That's some list. If I had any doubt that people were seeing things, it's gone now. How are you going to arrange the data?"

"In tables, and on a map," Rick explained.

"Fine. We can do it tonight. Want anything else?"

Scotty groaned. "I couldn't even drink a glass of water."

"Same here," Rick agreed.

"Then let's leave the crabs behind and take a ride."

On the way back to Cambridge, Steve Ames mused

aloud. "You know, it's an odd world. A few years ago there were flying saucer reports by the dozen. Each one was given lots of newspaper space. The Air Force conducted investigations. Then flying saucers got unpopular, the Air Force closed its project, and the newspapers wrote a funny story every time a report came in. Now we have a rash of sightings in one small area. People talk about it, but no one gets excited. The authorities brush it off as just hokum. Yet, your investigation today shows that people are seeing *something,* even if we don't know what."

Rick nodded thoughtfully. "What's even odder is that a well-known man disappears, people search for him for a couple of days, and then do nothing but talk about it. The police aren't even interested, so far as we can tell."

Steve laughed. "You're right. But look at it in another way. Assume you're the local policeman. Someone rushes in and tells you that Joe Doakes has been carried off by a flying saucer. You don't believe in flying saucers, but you know Doakes. You investigate. His boat has been found, but his body is missing. What do you assume? That he was really toted off by some mysterious object? Nope. You assume he was hurt or killed falling out of the boat. You know that sharks come into the bay and sometimes swim up creeks. You figure that the currents sometimes act in odd ways, depending on the winds. You figure a dozen natural kinds of things, none connected with mysterious flying objects. You call a coroner's jury, and not a man on it is willing to say for the record that he believes in flying saucers. What happens?"

"Case closed," Scotty said slowly, "because the

body isn't around. No proof of death, or even of accident. Pending proof of death—meaning the body—the jury finds that Joe Doakes is missing under mysterious circumstances and may have met with death or an accident by misadventure while engaged in his lawful business of crabbing."

"That's about it," Steve agreed. "It isn't really odd when you look at it that way. But you can bet the case isn't closed. It's just inactive, until something turns up. Remember there's no detective squad in a small town."

There was a combination gas station and store on the outskirts of Cambridge. Steve drove in and honked the horn. A young boy looked out of the store and called, "Howdy, Steve. Want gas?"

"Not tonight, Jimmy. Ask your grandfather where Calvert's Favor is located, will you?"

The boy came out of the store and walked toward the car. He was a freckle-faced towhead, with a grin wider than the Choptank River. "Heck, Steve, I don't have to ask gran'pop that. Everybody knows where Calvert's Favor is located."

"Not everybody," Steve returned. "I don't. How about letting us in on the secret, Jimmy?"

"It's no secret. Everybody around here knows it's located across the river from you. It's at the head of Swamp Creek."

CHAPTER VII

Sighting Data

STEVE's living room was an excellent place to work. In fact, it was a shade too comfortable. Rick and Scotty spent a half hour arguing over who would do what in putting their data down on paper, and both knew perfectly well that they were just stalling.

Finally Rick said, "Let's admit it. We're both stuffed with crab, a little sleepy, and too comfortable in these armchairs."

Scotty waved a hand languidly. "All right. I concede the point."

Steve Ames chuckled. "Suppose you move to less comfortable chairs. Those dining-room chairs should keep you upright. Get to work and I will too."

The boys hauled themselves to their feet reluctantly. Rick walked to the door and looked out through the screen. He could see the creek glistening, and, out beyond the dock where the houseboat and runabout were tied up, he saw ripples spreading where a fish had jumped. The air was still, and he could hear cicadas in the trees and shrubs.

"This is the land of pleasant living," he observed.

"I'm surprised anyone on the Eastern Shore ever gets a lick of work done."

"You certainly don't," Scotty retorted. "Come on over here and stop admiring the scenery."

Steve had produced large sheets of white paper, a ruler, and pencils. Rick sat down. "I'll act as recorder."

"Volunteering for the hardest job?" Scotty inquired. "The air must be affecting you."

"Nope." Rick shook his head. "I have just enough energy left to be realistic. I can't read your writing. Suppose I put down the headings. Location, date of sighting, time of sighting, direction of sighting, number of persons who saw object. What else?"

"Description," Scotty suggested. "Maybe that ought to be in two parts. One for shape and one for color."

Rick nodded. "Good idea. I'll rule lines as we go." He drew lines for the columns, printed his headings, and put in the first several horizontal lines. "Ready," he announced.

"We'll start with the first one. Location: five miles south of Wye Mills on Route 50."

Rick printed: "5M S Wye Mls Rte 50."

"Date of sighting, July 10. Time of sighting, between five and six in the evening."

Rick printed industriously. Scotty read from his notes until over twenty lines of information had been printed on the chart. Then Steve interrupted, bringing a tray of tall glasses of iced ginger ale.

The young agent put the tray down and scanned the columns while the boys helped themselves. In a

moment Steve nodded. "There's a pattern taking shape, at least in the descriptions. But I can't make much out of the dates and locations, yet."

"We'll keep plugging," Rick said. "Maybe we'll need to rearrange the columns before they make sense."

"You have a point," Steve agreed. "Use the chart for the source, then we can fill out sheets on the individual items, or I have some four-by-five-inch file cards that would be ideal."

"But we'll be at it all night," Scotty objected.

"I don't think so. Once the basic data are on paper, it will go fast. Keep at it. Yell if you want refills on the ginger ale. I need to finish my own homework."

The boys returned to logging the data while Steve settled down with a bulky report. In another hour the notebook had been exhausted, and the big sheet of paper was nearly full of ruled lines and columns, recording data.

"We're done," Rick announced.

Steve put his report aside and joined them at the table. The boys waited expectantly while the agent scanned the sheet.

"You've done a good job of collecting information," Steve said. "Now it needs breaking down some more. The mixture in the 'color' column bothers me. I have a hunch those colors may be related to the position of the sun. Look."

Rick watched as Steve's forefinger touched a line that showed the color as "dark." The finger moved across the line to the time of day, eleven A.M. Steve pointed to another line where the color was listed as

"orange." The time of day was seven fifteen P.M., with an additional note of "twilight."

"Got it," Scotty agreed. "You think the objects may actually be dark, but appear in various colors depending on the position of the sun and the position of the viewer."

"It makes sense," Rick agreed. "All of the colors listed—red, orange, silvery, bright—could be reflections of the sun on a smooth object."

Steve walked to a bookshelf and pulled down a copy of *The World Almanac*. "Sunrise and sunset times are listed in here. You can figure out quickly enough where the sun was in relation to the observer. It will take another sheet of paper and some more columns."

"You gave us an extra sheet," Rick replied. "How should I head the columns?"

Steve thought for a moment. "Three columns for the position of the sun. Rising, high, setting. Four columns for the position of the observer in relation to the flying object—north, south, east, or west. One column for color, and one for other comments such as 'shiny.' And, of course, you want a column for the time."

Rick recorded the data as Scotty read it off, checking *The World Almanac* for the sun's approximate positions. Steve was obviously interested. He started to read his report again, then abandoned it and came back to the table where the boys were working.

When the data had been transferred, the three studied it. Rick ran his eye down the columns quickly, getting an impression, then he went over the

data slowly. "You're right, Steve," he said finally. "It all tallies, even at a quick look. In every case where the object looked colored, the observer saw the sun striking it. Where it looked dark, the object was between the observer and the sun. Or, at least, the observer wasn't in a position to see the sun reflect off the object."

Scotty added, "In every case where the object looked red or orange, the sun was setting or had already set. In every case marked 'bright,' 'silvery,' or 'shiny,' the sun was high and the observer could see the sun reflecting from the object."

"It seems pretty clear," Steve agreed. "Now, we have only one really close-range sighting, and that was Rick's. How sure are you that the object was black?"

Rick shrugged. "I know enough not to trust my eyes completely in wind and rain. But there certainly wasn't any light to reflect off the object, and I'm pretty sure it was either black or very dark brown."

"That would fit all the sightings," Steve pointed out. "I'm assuming that the objects have a smooth surface that reflects light, even though the material may be dark colored. Didn't you suggest a kite made of dark plastic? That would fit the bill, except that the objects don't act like kites."

"What do they act like?" Scotty demanded.

Neither Steve nor Rick had an answer.

"Let's try for another piece of information," Steve suggested. "Put the dates down on cards. If you have sightings by different people on the same dates, and at about the same times, put them on the same

card. If there's a big time discrepancy—say one sighting in the morning and another in the afternoon —put them on different cards."

Rick looked up. "What are you trying to find?"

"Periodicity," Steve said promptly. "Is there any regularity in the sightings? Do they occur every three, four, or five days, or once a week on Mondays? Which reminds me. You might put down the day of the week, too. There's a calendar on the wall behind you."

"You read and I'll copy," Rick told Scotty. "Go ahead." He waited with pencil poised over a card. In a moment he looked at his pal. "What are you waiting for?"

Scotty was poring over the notebook again. His eyebrows knit. "You know, there's one chunk of data on just a few sightings that we didn't put down because we didn't have a column for it."

"What is it?" Steve asked.

"I know!" Rick exclaimed. "There were a few times when people said they saw yellow glows in the sky after they saw the objects. Isn't that it?"

Scotty nodded. "I've been counting. There were five instances. Two people said the glow wasn't really connected, because it came from Wallops Island."

"Why on earth didn't you include it in the chart?" Steve demanded.

"It doesn't fit," Scotty replied. "In every single case, the glow was to the southeast."

"Maybe it does fit," Steve said emphatically. "Boys, never leave out a bit of data because it doesn't seem to fit. This particular chunk could very well be the clue."

"Why?" Rick asked quickly.

Steve shook his head. "I'm not sure, so I don't want to say. But include every sighting of the yellow glow on the date cards. I'm going to borrow that set for a closer look."

Scotty began reading, while Rick recorded. When the cards were complete, they ran through them. There was no periodicity. The dates seemed completely random. Sometimes two sightings had been made at different times on the same date. There would be two days, three, four, five, or even six between sightings.

"Not a trace of pattern," Rick said.

"Who says stingarees have to fly on schedule?" Steve asked with a grin. "They're not supposed to be like planes. What's the next step?"

Scotty produced the map they had used. "One more job to do, and that's to plot the locations of the observers and draw lines in the directions of the sightings. That will show us if there's any regularity in the place where the flying objects appear."

"Very good," Steve approved.

Scotty took pencil and ruler and laid the map out flat. "You read location and direction, Rick, and I'll plot the data."

"Okay." Rick began with the first. "Five miles south of Wye Mills on Route 50. Direction, southwest."

Scotty measured the distance from Wye Mills, using the map scale in inches, then estimated the compass direction and drew a line. "Next."

Rick read on. By the time he had reached the tenth sighting, all three of them were waiting anxiously for each new bit of data to be plotted.

Finally the job was complete. Steve had hurried off a moment before and returned with a pair of compasses in his hand. As the boys watched, he put the sharp point of one compass leg into a spot on the map, adjusted the radius, and drew a perfect circle. He adjusted the radius again, and drew a second circle, slightly larger, then a third.

"Bull's-eye!" Rick said excitedly.

The direction lines bisected the outer concentric circles like the radii of an orb spider's web. In the center of the web was the smallest circle. Within the circle was the focal point of all flying object observations.

Rick said the name aloud.

"Swamp Creek!"

CHAPTER VIII

Calvert's Favor

THERE was a faint hint of coming daylight in the eastern sky when Rick, Steve, and Scotty walked down the pier to the tied-up boats. The boys had spent the night—or most of it—aboard the houseboat, until the alarm pulled them from their sleeping bags at four o'clock. Steve had breakfast cooking when they arrived at the farmhouse, and after coffee, bacon, and eggs, they started on their mission.

"Daybreak is the lowest peak of daily activity," Steve said as they climbed into the runabout. He took the pilot's seat, while Rick and Scotty prepared to cast off.

"You might say that the first glimmer of daylight is man's worst hour," Steve continued. "It's the time when battles start, when planes take off for dawn bombing runs. I've read that it's the time when most deaths occur in hospitals, although I don't know for certain that it's true. What's more important to us, it's the time of day when guards are most sleepy and least alert."

The young agent had been working as he talked, checking the outboard motor, checking the connec-

tions to the gasoline tank, and pumping pressure into it. Now he pressed the starter and the well-kept motor caught at once. Rick and Scotty cast off bow and stern lines and settled themselves in the seat next to Steve.

"Unless this mysterious Mr. Merlin suffers from sleepless nights, he's deep in slumber. The sound of a small boat won't disturb him, because he's used to the noise of motors from crabbers. We'll hope there is no guard on the place. If there is, we'll be fishing. Better have the rods ready. One of you can sit in back and troll from there."

The outboard runabout moved away from the pier and into the creek. Steve knew his way perfectly, and he opened the throttle to half speed, steering through the curve at the mouth of the creek, rounding the buoy, and heading directly toward Swamp Creek.

It had taken the houseboat over twenty minutes to make the run. Steve covered the distance in ten. As he throttled down and swung the runabout into Swamp Creek, Rick's eye picked up a glimmer of light, then the shape of something white cruising toward them.

For a moment he stared into the lessening gloom, then said, "It's Orvil Harris. Anyway, it looks like his boat."

Steve said nothing for a moment, then he headed directly toward the crabber. As the two boats closed, Harris paused in his crabbing and watched the three in the runabout approach.

Steve matched the crab boat's speed and nudged the runabout alongside. "Howdy," he called.

Orvil Harris reached out and caught the runabout's gunwale, then took the line Rick passed to him. He made it fast around a cleat. "Up early," he greeted them. "Come to watch me crab?"

"Not exactly," Rick returned. "Mr. Harris, this is Mr. Ames."

The crabber reached out a muscular hand and Steve stretched to meet it. "Mighty pretty place you have on Martins Creek," Harris said. "Admired it many's the time."

"Thanks," Steve returned. "Be glad to have you drop in any time."

"I may do that. Thanks."

"The boys tell me your cousin was the one taken by a flying saucer."

Harris grinned. "He was taken. I'm not sayin' how until I know."

"What do you know about Calvert's Favor?"

Harris rubbed his chin, and made a slight correction in the crab boat's course. "Present owner is a man named Merlin. No one knows anythin' about him, and no one asks. Has a big thug with him all the time, and takes exception to people gettin' nosy. Most folks got snubbed and drew back, so to speak. Jim Hardin—he's a fisherman hereabouts—took exception and got beaten up. Hardin's not easy to lick. After that, folks stopped speakin' to Merlin and company."

"How big's the company?" Steve asked.

"Merlin, bodyguard, a little squirt with no chin, and three others. Cooks and bottle washers, likely. Would it be polite to ask why you're interested?"

Steve had been studying Harris since the two boats

joined up, Rick knew, so he wasn't surprised when Steve gave a direct reply.

"You'll keep this to yourself, please. The boys have been doing a little research, and it's clear these unidentified flying objects people have been seeing come from Swamp Creek. That points to the old mansion, especially since Mr. Merlin is so secretive about himself. We decided to get up before the people at the mansion were likely to be about, and look the place over. If it looks promising, we'll try keeping an eye on it."

Harris nodded. "I'll keep it to myself, you can be sure. If the mystery of those flyin' stingarees gets solved, we may find out what happened to Cousin Link. I'll help if I can."

"You know these waters pretty well," Steve returned. "Is there any way of getting to Calvert's Favor, or within watching distance, without going up this creek?"

The crabber reached over and turned a switch, cutting his engine. "There is, for that boat you're in. About thirty yards downstream from the entrance to this creek, there is a break in the line of swamp grass along the shore. It's a little lead, a channel maybe six feet wide and from two to three feet deep. It runs into the swamp. Right at the place where the water gets too narrow for the boat, a man who didn't care if he got muddy or wet could go through the brush to an old duck blind right across from the mansion. A pair of good glasses would give him a right good view of the whole thing."

"We couldn't see the mansion from the boat?" Rick asked.

"The brush is too thick. Tell you what, if you got ground tackle aboard, drop a hook and come over with me. I'll run you up the creek and you can take a good look. If anyone's out watchin', they'll only see a crab boat lookin' for a place to set lines."

"Scotty," Steve directed, "there's a grapnel on a line up on the bow, under that small hatch. Toss it in, please."

Scotty stood up on the seat, stepped to the bow, and found the small, four-pronged anchor. He dropped it into the water, let out line, and tied the line fast to the bow cleat. "Okay, Steve."

The three got aboard the crab boat as Harris started his engine. "Make yourselves comfortable," the crabber invited. "There's a pair of glasses on the engine box."

With the binoculars Rick and Steve had brought, that made three pairs each. The crabber swung the boat around expertly and headed upstream. The sky was light now, and far overhead a wisp of cirrus was glowing pink, a warning of coming sunrise.

Rick sat on the gunwale and looked ahead. The creek narrowed for a few hundred yards, then widened again. The left bank, going upstream, was lined with scrub and swamp grass. The right bank began to change, the swampy area giving way to good ground that rose slightly from the water's edge. Soon the right bank was nearly three feet above the water, and the scrub had given way to an occasional tree, and some grassland that hadn't been mowed this year.

Then Calvert's Favor came into view and Rick caught his breath. It was a stunning plantation

house. The tall columns made Rick think of pictures of the Old South, but as the boat turned slightly and more of the house came into view, he saw that it had a strictly Maryland character. Attached to the largest portion of the house, the one with the columns, was a slightly smaller section, with a still smaller section completing the picture. It was a "telescope house"—the kind that the Eastern Shore natives referred to as "big house, little house, and one in the middle."

A broad sweep of lawn, broken only by flagstone walks and trees, extended from the creek's edge to the house. The trees were ancient dogwoods, with a single huge willow for extra shade. There was a small pier extending into the creek, and from the rotted pilings next to it, Rick saw that the original pier had been much larger.

A white barn stood at a short distance from the house. A barn of that size, Rick thought, meant a pretty substantial farm. He searched for signs of life and saw none. There was a boat, he noticed, an outboard skiff perhaps fifteen feet long, pulled up on the bank under an oak tree at the edge where the lawn met uncut field. A lawn table and chairs under the big willow looked inviting, and he speculated that Merlin and friends must spend considerable time there. Some of the chairs were of the padded variety, covered with plastic wet from the morning dew.

Scotty pointed to the roof of the mansion. "Must be a ham radio operator there. Look at that hay rake."

Both Rick and Steve had the same thoughts as they stared at the tall antenna, with its cluster of small rods joining a single main bar at right angles on top

of the pole. The antenna might be needed for fringe-area television—or, on the other hand, it might be a communications antenna, as Scotty had said.

"Looks interesting," Steve said.

The creek flowed only a little distance past the mansion before it became so narrow that Orvil Harris had to turn for the trip downstream. As the crab boat came abreast of the mansion again, Rick looked to the other side of the creek and saw the duck blind. It wasn't exactly opposite the house, being designed so that gunners in the blind would shoot diagonally across the creek and downstream, rather than near the house itself.

The blind was on stilts, made of board, with a big "picture window" without glass through which duck hunters could fire freely. It was designed for entry by boat, and there was a line of poles sticking up from the water that marked the boat's docking place. In season, the entire blind including the poles would be covered with a screen of fresh foliage, so that hunters, blind, and boat would seem like a natural object to any duck that flew by.

Rick saw that the entrance, at the point where the boat would nose in, was downstream from the mansion, at the back corner of the blind. Anyone approaching from the swamp behind the blind could enter unseen from Calvert's Favor.

Not until they were back at the cove did any of them speak.

"That antenna was odd," Steve said. "Did you ever see anything like it, Rick?"

"Not exactly," Rick admitted. "It could be for TV,

although it's an unusual design, or it could be some kind of ham rig, as Scotty said."

"Or it could be something else," Steve concluded.

"No sign of a flyin'-saucer launcher," Orvil Harris said. He was stoking his battered brier.

Rick grinned. "I wouldn't know one if I saw it."

"Well, that wraps it up," Steve said. "Let's get aboard the runabout and head home. I've got to make a plane." He shook hands with Orvil Harris. "Glad to have met you after waving at you for so long."

"Likewise. Now, you let me in on this if you can. I'm Link's only kin hereabouts, so I feel responsible, so to speak. Call me up. I'm in the phone book. I'll keep crabbin' in this creek until further notice, so you can find me here until midmornin' any day."

"We'll let you know if anything comes up," Rick agreed.

Scotty borrowed a boat hook and pulled the runabout closer, then he stepped to the forward deck while Steve and Rick got into the seat. Scotty pulled up the grapnel while Steve started the motor. In a moment they were waving to Harris as the runabout headed for home.

It was full daylight now, and the rim of the sun was just above the trees on the horizon.

"Two items from the morning's work," Scotty summed up. "We know how the mansion can be watched, and we have an odd kind of antenna. Anything else?"

"We have an ally," Rick reminded. "Orvil Harris."

"We bought him on pure faith," Steve pointed out.

"It isn't often I stake the game on a man's face, but if Orvil Harris isn't a sound individual, I'll lose my faith in human nature."

Back at the farmhouse, Steve made fresh coffee and toast. While the boys relaxed sleepily, he went to a closet and brought out a case and a leather gadget bag.

The boys sat up and watched while he opened the case. Rick gasped. It was a telescope, a marvelously compact reflector type, precision made and very expensive. Rick had often studied the ads of this particular model, and he looked at it with some envy. He could hardly keep from picking it up.

Steve opened the gadget bag and brought out a Polaroid camera and set of rings. Then he returned to the closet and brought back a sturdy tripod with a geared head.

"Here's the equipment," he said. He took the telescope from its padded case, and screwed its base to the tripod, then he adjusted the tripod until it was standing securely.

"Watch this," he commanded. "You'll have to do it, because you can't carry the whole thing assembled."

Using the rings, which were adapters, he fitted the camera to the eyepiece of the telescope. "That's all there is to it. You focus the 'scope eyepiece by turning this knurled knob. Then you set the camera to infinity, adjust the iris for the proper light, and put the camera in place. Any questions?"

"What aperture?" Rick asked. "Normal exposure?"

"Make it one f-stop less than you'd use if you were taking the picture through a regular camera with a long lens. Anything else?"

Scotty grinned. "It's pointless to ask what you want us to do with this. We're to get pictures of that antenna—from the duck blind."

"Plus anything else that looks interesting, including the occupants," Rick added.

Steve spread his hands in an expressive gesture. "What more could an instructor want than students who know the answers before the questions are asked? I won't even tell you to be careful, because I know you will."

"We will," Rick assured him.

"All right. Listen, boys, we have no idea what we're up against, but we do have some facts." Steve ticked them off on his fingers. "One, flying objects originate at the mansion. There's no other place on the creek that seems likely. Two, the house is inhabited by a man who doesn't like questions. Three, said man has a bodyguard who gets rough. Four, one man already is missing, perhaps because he got curious. Enough said?"

The boys nodded soberly.

"Then go to it, whenever you feel like it—after you've dropped me at the airport, that is. Be here by four this afternoon. If I don't call, meet the five-o'clock flight. If I do, it will mean I've gotten tied up."

Steve hesitated. "Just one more thing. Be *really* careful. All I have is a hunch, but that hunch tells me we're up against something dangerous. If Link Harris is dead, as he probably is, there's a fair chance he was murdered."

The agent's keen eyes met theirs in turn. "Don't get into a spot you can't get out of," he concluded.

CHAPTER IX

The Duck Blind

ORVIL HARRIS had described the opening to the hidden waterway, but when the boys examined the line of reeds and marsh grass there was no sign of it. "He said thirty yards downstream," Scotty remembered.

Rick was at the wheel of the runabout. "Climb out on the bow," he suggested. "Take the boat hook with you. I'll just keep nosing in until we find it."

"Okay." Scotty took the short, aluminum boat hook from its fastenings in the small cockpit, stood up on the seat, and stepped over the windshield to the bow. For a moment he surveyed the shoreline from his higher vantage point. "There's a place that looks promising." He held the boat hook out like a spear, pointing.

Rick put the runabout in gear, and moved forward at idling speed. Looking over the side, he could see the bottom clearly. They were in only two feet of water, and the outboard was stirring up mud at the stern.

"No good," Scotty called. "That one doesn't go anywhere. Try upstream another six feet."

Rick turned the boat, watching for the opening Scotty had spotted. He saw it a moment later. "Looks too small," he called back.

"I think it opens up. Go ahead slow."

The runabout nosed up to the almost solid line of tall swamp grass, and Scotty leaned forward. "I think this is it. Take it easy."

The heavy grass rubbed on both sides of the boat, but nothing impeded its progress. The runabout pushed through the brown-green swale until it was almost enclosed by the grass. Then they were through, into a narrow channel with high grass on both sides. It was hard for Rick to see ahead because of the turns, and Scotty served as his eyes, motioning from one side to the other as the channel shifted.

Rick wondered if the sound of the outboard motor could be heard at the mansion, and decided it probably could not. The heavy marsh grass was a good sound baffle and the motor was relatively quiet. He leaned out, trying to see ahead. There were many birds in the swamp, and next to the boat a surprised snapping turtle looked up briefly, then scurried into the mud for cover.

The channel was narrowing now. Scotty looked back and drew his hand across his throat in the old signal to "cut." Rick instantly killed the motor.

"I'll pole us," Scotty said softly. He began using the boat hook as a pole, digging it into the bank and pulling the runabout ahead. Finally he stopped, and wiped sweat from his face. "This is about as far as we can go."

Rick took a swipe at a black fly that bit him on the arm. "Okay. Let's collect the gear and get started."

Scotty tied the boat to a projecting root while Rick took the equipment from its place under the seat and put it within reach on the forward deck, then jumped ashore. His feet hit apparently solid ground, but kept right on going down into a foot of ooze.

He lifted one foot that was a black blob of mud, tried to locate more solid footing on which to place it, and gave it up as a bad job. He leaned over and took the telescope case and tripod.

Scotty picked up the Polaroid camera and their binoculars and came ashore, sinking into the swamp as Rick had done. He grinned wryly. "We're up to our knees in this mystery already."

Rick lifted a foot with five pounds of mud clinging to it. "If we get in it up to our hips, we'll have a fine time getting out. How far do you think it is to the duck blind?"

"Maybe twenty-five yards. Not much more than that, maybe less. Come on."

Slowly, because of the need to haul each foot out of the mud, the boys started through the swale. The marsh grass was over their heads, forming a thick screen. The grass, however, was no handicap to the biting flies. Within a few seconds each boy was carrying equipment in one hand, using the other to fight off the swarms. An occasional mosquito added to their discomfort.

The muddy ooze thinned, then gave way to higher ground. The marsh grass was less thick and there was an occasional clump of willow. Rick studied the terrain ahead, and in a moment caught sight of dark-green foliage among the brown tips of swamp grass. In a few more feet he made out the tops of

trees, and then the glint of sunlight on the aluminum of the antenna they had come to photograph.

Scotty had seen it, too. He stopped and the boys consulted.

"We're about twenty yards too far upstream," Scotty guessed.

Rick estimated as best he could. "I think you're right. Let's stay on high ground and head downstream a little. We must be almost there."

Scotty turned and Rick followed, waving uselessly at the cloud of insects. He was grateful for the advice Steve had given them to wear long trousers and long-sleeved shirts. If they had been wearing shorts, the insects would have had free access to several square feet of bare hide.

Both boys counted steps automatically, and after twenty paces downstream, Scotty turned toward the mansion once more. They pushed through the tall grass into thick mud, then into water with a deep muddy bottom. A few more steps and the grass thinned. Scotty stopped and motioned Rick back. They moved sideways, then forward again, and emerged with the duck blind between them and Calvert's Favor.

Rick thought to himself that it had been pretty good navigation, considering that most of the journey had been blind, in grass over their heads. Apparently Scotty thought so, too. He turned and gave Rick a big grin, then headed for the rear of the duck blind.

The water deepened, washing off some of the mud. Rick reached down and splashed a handful on his face. It was warm. He saw a wet black head emerge from under the duck blind and speed for shore. It

was a startled water rat. Alerted by the small splash of their coming, the rodent decided to take better cover. Then they were at the corner of the blind where the entrance was located.

The floor of the blind was level with their chests. Rick looked in. There wasn't much space, since the blind had been built to provide only a place for hunters to sit, wait, and then shoot from kneeling or sitting positions.

Both boys put their equipment on the dry wooden floor. Then Rick swung himself up and pushed the equipment back to make room for Scotty. For a moment they sat on the floor, resting. Coming through the swamp had been exhausting work.

After a few moments' rest, Rick moved to the side of the duck blind and found a small opening, a square window about six inches on a side, that had apparently been made to give the hunters a view in that direction. The opening was near the forward, upstream corner, and it looked out on Calvert's Favor.

Merlin the mysterious and his two close companions were sitting under the willow tree enjoying something liquid from tall glasses. As Rick watched, a fourth man, evidently a servant, brought a tray on which a silver pitcher rested. The boy could see the trickles of water cascading down the outside, and knew they were caused by moisture condensing on the cold metal of the pitcher. He moistened his lips. A fine pair of dunderheads, he and Scotty were. They had come without even a canteen of water.

"Easy shot," he whispered to Scotty. "Let's set up and take the pictures, then get out of here. I'm getting thirsty just watching them."

Scotty adjusted the tripod, while Rick took the telescope out of its case with reverent hands. It was a beautiful and delicate piece of equipment, Steve's personal property, and he appreciated the trust the agent had placed in them by allowing its use. He fitted the instrument to the mounting screw on the tripod, then aimed it through the six-inch window. When he squinted through the eyepiece, he saw only willow branches, but, by keeping his eye in place and cranking the geared tripod head, he quickly aligned the telescope with the trio under the willow.

The telescope had a fixed focus, and was designed for looking at stars. Consequently, the field of vision was extremely narrow at the short distance across the water, and Rick could only manage to get Merlin and his small, insignificant-looking companion into the frame. What's more, they were upside down, as is common in reflecting telescopes. The boy knew there was an erecting prism in the case, a device that would put the image upright, but it couldn't be used with the camera. Anyway, it wouldn't matter, since the print could be turned over.

He studied the faces in the upside-down position. The telescope gave him an even better close-up than at the restaurant. Again he groped for the identity of the white-haired man, but it eluded him.

Scotty tapped him on the shoulder and motioned that the camera was ready. Rick moved aside and his pal quickly fitted the camera to the telescope and tightened the mounting rings. Rick nodded to indicate that the telescope was on target, and Scotty tripped the camera.

The advantage of the Polaroid camera is that the

picture can be seen within seconds. Scotty quickly went through the simple routine, and within a quarter of a minute the boys were looking at the photo. It was an excellent close-up, but a trifle dark. Scotty opened the iris on the camera another stop and Rick rechecked the alignment. Scotty snapped the picture and processed it. This time it was perfect, only slightly hazy because of the rising heat waves across the hundred yards of distance.

Rick readjusted the telescope for a full view of the third man. His picture was added to the others. Scotty wiped both with fixative and put them on the floor to dry.

The antenna was next. Rick focused on it without difficulty, but the field of view was so narrow that he couldn't see all of it. They would have to photograph it in two sections, then fit the prints together.

Five minutes after their arrival at the duck blind, they were back in the swamp, the pictures protected in a plastic bread wrapper Rick had brought. They cut directly across the swamp and emerged, hot, sticky, and dirty, only a few yards from the boat. They stowed the equipment wordlessly, then poled backwards into the wider channel. It was too narrow to turn, so Rick started the motor and backed out with great caution.

Once in the clear, they headed at top speed for Steve's, tied up at the pier, and plunged into the water without even bothering to remove their clothes. Their only precaution was to empty their pockets.

Rick luxuriated in the coolness of clean water, then stripped to his undershorts and threw his sodden clothes onto the pier. Only when he was sure he had

Scotty fitted the camera to the telescope

washed off the last of the clinging mud did he pull himself up to the houseboat cockpit, Scotty following.

They toweled and put on clean clothes, then carried the equipment back to the farmhouse. Two bottles of Coke apiece from the refrigerator had them feeling normal again. Over the last one, they studied the photos.

"I don't think we've ever known Merlin," Rick said thoughtfully. "We've seen him, but we don't know him."

Scotty scratched a mosquito bite. "Think he might be some kind of public figure?"

Rick looked up sharply. "I think you hit it! If that's true, we should be able to get him identified easily."

"Steve could do it through JANIG," Scotty suggested.

"It would take too long. He won't be home until tonight, and the picture wouldn't reach JANIG until tomorrow. Then it would take a day to check it out."

"Are we in a hurry?" Scotty asked.

Rick chuckled. "I am. But don't ask me why. Look, I'll bet Duke or Jerry could identify it by going through the newspaper morgue." Their newspaper friends were owner-editor and reporter for the Whiteside paper back home.

"They're on vacation," Scotty reminded him. Once each year, the paper was turned over to a friend of Duke's, a former newspaperman turned professor of journalism, who used the occasion to give some of his students practical experience.

That was true, Rick remembered. Neither Duke nor Jerry would be available. Who else did they know who could help? Suddenly he snapped his fin-

gers. "I've got it! Ken Holt would help, if we could get the picture to him."

Ken Holt, the young newsman whose adventures were favorite reading for Rick and Scotty, had once asked Spindrift for help, and Rick had given him a set of pocket-size radio transceivers of the kind known as "The Megabuck Network."

"Sandy Allen is a photographer," Scotty pointed out. "He might know these people."

Rick took a chair next to the telephone and dialed the operator. "A person-to-person call," he stated, "to Mr. Ken Holt, at the *Brentwood Advance,* Brentwood, New Jersey." He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Let's hope he and Sandy aren't off on an assignment somewhere."

Luck was on their side. Ken Holt was in, and he was delighted to be of help. "Put the picture in the mail," the young reporter suggested. "If you make it airmail, special delivery, we'll have it first thing in the morning. With luck, we might even get it tonight. We'll phone you as soon as we have an identification. Incidentally, the Megabuck units worked like a charm, as I told you when I wrote. Thanks a lot."

"Glad they were helpful," Rick replied. "We'll hurry to town and get the picture in the mail right away."

He hung up and nodded at Scotty. "We'll get the picture ready, and take it to town when we go to pick Steve up. If we're a little early, the letter probably will go out on the early evening plane to Washington."

Scotty nodded. "What time is it?"

Rick glanced at his watch. "Nearly three. We'll be

ready to take off as soon as Steve calls, or doesn't."

"If he calls, that means he won't be back," Scotty reminded.

"No matter. We'll go to town anyway, and have an early dinner."

Rick had envelopes and letter paper on the houseboat. He wrote a brief note to Ken, addressed the envelope, and printed AIRMAIL SPECIAL DELIVERY on both sides, then enclosed the best picture of Merlin and sealed it. Scotty spent the time on a small repair job, taping up the neoprene gasoline hoses that carried fuel to the houseboat motors. By the time he was finished, it was nearly four. The boys went into the house to wait.

Steve called on the dot of four. "Rick? . . . Steve. I'm sorry, fellow. I have a little more to do on this case, and I'll have to stay over. Everything going all right?"

Rick briefed him quickly on the day's events and Steve replied, "It takes about half an hour for a letter to make the early evening plane. Allow enough time."

"We will," Rick assured him. "Anything new on the sighting data?"

"Not yet. I sent the cards to the computing center, but they won't have time to run the data through until tomorrow or the next day. Make yourselves at home, and don't spend all your time on flying stingarees. Get in some fishing and swimming."

Rick assured him that they were enjoying the vacation and would try to get in some fishing. He hung up and turned to Scotty.

"He'll be in tomorrow on the same plane. He wants us to get in some fishing."

Scotty chuckled. "I thought he knew you better than that. Give you a mystery to chew on and there's no room for anything else in that thick Brantish skull."

"We'll solve this one," Rick said confidently. "Then we'll fish."

Scotty just grinned.

CHAPTER X

Ken Holt Comes Through

SOMEWHERE in the oak trees across the creek a cardinal sang his lovely evening song. An osprey, etched in black against the dark blue of the sky, whirled in lazy circles watching the water below. A muskrat appeared briefly, his sleek head making a V of ripples in the calm water.

Rick and Scotty, sprawled comfortably in beach chairs on the lawn in front of Steve's house, sipped the last of their iced tea, and watched the movements and listened to the sounds in companionable silence. Both boys, admitting that, for the immediate present, they were slightly overdosed with rich food, had agreed to settle for a sandwich and iced tea. A brief stop at a store en route back from the post office had provided the necessities.

Rick was physically relaxed, but mentally active. It was characteristic of him that he never let go of a puzzle until he had found a solution, or had tried all possibilities and been forced to admit defeat. He was a long way from defeat at the moment. The case of the flying stingaree was just getting interesting.

"What are the flying stingarees?" he asked quietly.

Scotty shifted position in his chair and looked at Rick quizzically. "You don't expect an answer. But I can tell you a few things they are not."

"Tell away," Rick urged.

"They are not flying saucers, aircraft, kites, sting rays, birds, fish, or good red herrings. Beyond that, deponent sayeth not, as the legal boys say."

"Uh-huh. And why are they not flying saucers?"

"For the same reason they're not aircraft. If you recall all the talks with people who've seen them, they don't maneuver, and they don't travel very fast. They appear—or they're noticed, let's say—and they just get smaller and smaller until they vanish. They move, but not much."

Rick nodded. "The circle we drew around all the sightings doesn't cover a very large territory. All the sightings have been within that circle. People had to look toward Swamp Creek to see the objects. Yet, they did something interesting. They grew smaller. What makes things seem to grow smaller?"

"Apparent size decreases with distance," Scotty replied promptly.

"Sure. And how do you get distance, when the sightings are all within a circle only a few miles in diameter?"

"Only one way. With altitude. The things had to be going up."

Rick agreed. "That's how I figure it, too. It also explains why the circle of sightings is so small. Above a certain altitude, the objects are no longer visible. Or they're not so visible that they attract attention. I suppose we could work out some calculations. How large an object can be seen readily at what distance?

Then we could apply a little trigonometry and figure their size."

"We could," Scotty agreed, "but do we need to? Let's assume the object you saw was typical. How big was it?"

Rick thought it over. He had had only a quick glimpse, and the background had been the gray of the storm. His vision had been obscured because of the rain. "Maximum of ten feet across and maybe eight tall. It was probably less."

"Okay. So the reason sightings are confined to this area is because the objects are fairly small. When people see them, they're relatively close, and fairly low. Even the small planes that fly from the airfield are much bigger than the flying stingarees, but when the planes go over at about five thousand feet, they seem tiny. At that altitude the flying stingarees must be at the limit of really good visibility."

"I read you loud and clear. So the objects are sent from Calvert's Favor, and they climb. They don't climb straight up, though. The wind carries them. The reason I think so is that the one I saw must have been driven by the wind, right down the creek toward me. It didn't climb until it got away from the funneling effect of the creek and into the river, then it went up pretty fast. At least it seemed to have risen fast when I looked over the top of the boat at it."

Scotty crunched an ice cube. "We're getting somewhere. There's only one kind of unpowered, vertical rising thing I know of. Are you with me?"

Rick finished his drink. "Balloon," he said crisply.

"On the beam," Scotty approved. "The only thing that doesn't fit is the shape."

Rick asked, "What's a balloon? It's just a gas-tight container. We're used to thinking of balloons as spheres, because it's the most efficient shape for internal pressure. But a balloon can be any shape. Another thing—balloons for high altitudes aren't fully inflated on the ground. Maybe the flying stingarees have a different shape when they get higher and in less dense atmosphere where the gas distends them."

"An odd shape could be used as camouflage, too, if you didn't want people to recognize the balloon. But why would a strange assortment of characters like Merlin and company send up balloons?" Scotty wondered.

Rick smiled. "I've been wondering that myself. Would they send up a balloon that didn't carry something?"

"I don't know. Was the one you saw carrying anything?"

Rick sat upright. "Maybe it was! You know, I haven't even thought of it since then, but I think there was a splash when it went by. Something sort of clanged off the rail over me, even if it didn't dent the rail. Do you suppose the thing dropped its payload right next to us?"

"You'll have to decide that," Scotty said. "If you heard something bounce off the rail, then a splash, I'd say there might be a pretty good chance that's what happened. I couldn't see any marks on the rail when we looked." They had checked the rail during the first day at Steve's.

Rick closed his eyes and made himself remember what it had been like when he went down the catwalk to the bow. His mind drew a picture, and he saw

himself bent forward into the wind. In his memory he felt the slashing rain, the slipperiness of the wet anchor line. He could visualize the water whipped into dimpled wavelets by wind and rain. He saw the flying stingaree loom, and saw himself dropping flat. There had been a clang as something hard hit the rail! There *had* been a splash!

He went over it again, searching his memory for details he had forgotten or which had only registered vaguely at the time. He studied the shape and texture of the object he had seen so briefly. He saw its red eyes open and glare at him, saw the extended claws reaching . . .

He came out of his chair with a yell, arms extended to defend himself.

Scotty stood next to him in the darkness. "Hey, take it easy, Rick! I didn't think I'd startle you so when I shook you."

Rick stared. "Did I fall asleep? I must have. I was trying to remember, and suddenly I was dreaming about red eyes and claws—"

Scotty laughed softly. "If you've got to have nightmares, at least do it in comfort. Let's go to the boat and go to bed."

Rick dreamed no more of the flying stingarees. In the morning he couldn't have said what his dreams had been about, except that they had been pleasant.

In the bright glare of morning, the whole thing seemed dreamlike. It was preposterous to imagine that flying objects, probably balloons shaped like stingarees, were launched from a famous mansion that dated back to the days of the early Maryland colony. But the sighting data couldn't be ignored.

Dreamlike or not, something strange was going on at Calvert's Favor.

The boys breakfasted in the farmhouse, reducing Steve's supply of eggs substantially and wiping out the bacon reserve. "We'll have to shop sometime today," Rick observed. "Steve has plenty of food here, but we don't want to use it when there's a store so close."

"Sure," Scotty agreed. "But when? It may have to wait until we go after Steve. We can't very well leave the house, or at least both of us can't. Ken Holt might call."

Rick nodded and poured himself a cup of coffee. He had thought of that. They had to give Ken time to get the picture and check it out. By the latest, they should hear before noon—unless the job turned out to be very difficult. That would leave four hours before they would have to leave the house to pick up Steve. Four hours was time enough for the investigation Rick had in mind.

After breakfast they settled down with the data sheets and notebook to review them once more. But only one additional fact emerged. Two people thought, but weren't absolutely sure, that they had seen a spurt of fire from the flying stingarees. Rick wondered if they had seen a sudden flare of sunlight from some highly reflective part of the object.

It was two minutes before nine when the phone rang. Both boys jumped, but Rick got there first. "Hello?"

"Rick? . . . This is Ken. Why don't you give us something hard to do? The envelope arrived three minutes ago, and I was just taking the picture out

when Sandy walked in. He took one look and asked what I was doing with a snapshot of Lefty Camillion. The hair is white and the mustache is gone, but it's Lefty."

Rick gasped. "My sainted aunt! Of course! I should have known it myself."

"There's more. Sandy recognized Lefty's small friend too. This is an odd one, Rick. The man is Dr. Elbert K. Drews. He was fired six months ago by Space Electronics Industries. It was a big story for us, because the plant is located in the next town. The reason he was fired came out during the monopoly investigations. Turned out he had been selling the firm's industrial secrets to its competitors. It was a shock, because he had such a big reputation as an electronics wizard. He got some kind of national prize a year ago for developing a new high-speed system for something. Let's see—here's my note. It says, 'Dr. Drews was the originator of a new and unusual system for the rapid telemetry of data from space. The system is considered remarkable for its compactness and speed of operation. The ground installation is scarcely larger than a console-model television set.' Hope that means something to you, Rick."

"Thanks a million, Ken. It seems to fit, but I'm not sure how."

"Let us know if you find out. And if we can do anything else, you know the phone number."

"We'll call if anything comes up. Thanks again, Ken."

Rick hung up and stared at the phone thoughtfully, trying to fit this new information into the scheme of things. Scotty had been sitting on the edge of his

chair since the conversation started. He said, with some exasperation, "Well? Out with it!"

"Mr. Merlin is Lefty Camillion. His pal is an electronics wizard who was fired by Space Electronics Industries for selling industrial secrets to the firm's competitors." Rick rapidly sketched in the rest of the conversation.

Scotty sank back into his chair. "His hair was black, and now it's white. He must have been keeping it dyed, and decided to go natural. And he shaved off that mustache. Probably that was dyed black, too."

"You're right." Rick shook his head in dismay. Lefty Camillion, whose first name was Thomas, was a notorious crime syndicate leader who had come into prominence about two years ago during Senate investigations of racketeering. In three days Camillion had become a television personality, of sorts, when it became clear that he apparently was responsible for a number of murders and a thousand lesser crimes, although he himself had not done the actual killings. There was insufficient evidence to jail him, but enough to deport him. He dropped out of sight while his lawyers were fighting the deportation proceedings. Now he had shown up again, on the Eastern Shore.

"A crime syndicate chief, a crooked scientist, flying stingarees, an old mansion, a peculiar antenna, and a missing crabber. What does it add up to?" Rick demanded.

Scotty shrugged. He didn't answer. There was no answer—yet.

CHAPTER XI

On the Bottom

THERE were three wooden cases stored in the full-length closet in the houseboat cabin. Rick and Scotty took the two bulkiest to the cockpit and opened them to disclose full skin-diving equipment. The boys had made the cases themselves, to be carried like suitcases. Each held a single air tank, regulator, mask, fins, snorkel, underwater watch, depth gauge, weight belt, equipment belt, and knife. The third case contained spears and spear guns, but they wouldn't need those in searching for the object that had splashed near the houseboat.

While Rick checked the equipment, made sure there was sufficient air in the tanks, and put on the regulators, Scotty searched for a heavy stake and something with which to drive it. He found a sledge hammer in Steve's workshop. At the edge of the woods was a pile of saplings that had been cut to make a fence. He chose a sapling that would serve as a stake and took it back to the boat.

One of the spare lines that the houseboat carried was quarter-inch nylon. Scotty fastened one end of

the small rope to the sapling, about halfway up, and secured it with a timber hitch. Then he wound the rope on the sapling as smoothly as possible.

Rick finished checking the equipment and announced that he was ready.

"Same here," Scotty replied. "Let's get into swim trunks."

As the two changed, Rick asked, "Suppose we find something, but can't get it up without help? How do we mark the place?"

Scotty paused. Normally they would simply attach a line to a float and secure the float to the object. But a float would attract attention. "Take bearings?"

Rick shook his head. "The boat will be swinging at anchor. It might be hard to get good bearings. Would a piece of fish line work? We could tie it to the object, carry it to the shore, and secure it to something underwater. The line would sink. Later, we could just drag until we caught the line."

"It would work," Scotty agreed. "There's a new spool of heavy line on the shelf in the closet. Fifty yards. That should do."

"Especially since the most we would need is fifty feet," Rick agreed. "I'll stick it in a belt pocket, just in case."

Back on deck, Rick started the houseboat's outboard motors and listened critically. They were operating smoothly. Scotty walked up the pier and untied the bowline. At Rick's signal, he stepped aboard on the foredeck, bringing the line with him. Rick cast off the stern line, pushed the houseboat away from the pier, then put the motors in gear.

The trip to Swamp Creek was a familiar one now.

Rick cut corners, knowing he had enough water under the keel, heading directly for the creek entrance. Scotty came back to the cockpit and joined him.

"Do you suppose Orvil Harris will be around?"

Rick shrugged. "It's pretty late for a crabber. He's probably gone by now."

"I wonder if he'll ever see any flying stingarees come out of the creek."

Rick shook his head. "Most of the sightings are in the late morning or late afternoon. Only a couple were around dawn."

While the houseboat moved across the Little Choptank, Scotty checked the tide tables. He reported that the tide was coming in. It was about one hour from high tide. Rick had been studying the chart. "No problem," he said. "Mean low water averages four feet in the cove, with seven feet in the middle. Think your stake will be long enough?"

Scotty had placed the sapling with its winding of rope on the cabin top. He estimated its length again. "Depends on how deep the mud is. If it's more than three feet, the top of the stake will be under water."

"Three feet is a lot of mud," Rick said. "It's likely a lot less than that."

He turned into the creek mouth, throttling back. It would be hard to anchor precisely where the houseboat had been anchored that first night, but he was sure they could find the spot within twenty feet. Scotty went up on the bow and got the anchor ready.

"Use about thirty feet of line," Rick called. He took the houseboat to the exact center of the cove, as closely as he could estimate, then put the motors in reverse to kill the speed. When it fell to zero, he

yelled to Scotty. Scotty lowered the anchor and made it fast, then hurried back to join Rick, who backed off until he felt the anchor dig in.

It was silent in the cove with the motors off. "I'll start," Rick offered, and at Scotty's nod he picked up his Scuba and slipped into the harness. His weight belt was next, then his fins. Finally he slipped the mask strap over his head, and put the mouthpiece in place. He took a couple of breaths to make sure he was getting air, then walked to the edge of the cockpit and fell backward into the water, letting his tank take the shock of landing. He slipped the mask off, took the mouthpiece out, and spat into the mask to prevent fogging, then he rinsed it, put it on, and replaced the mouthpiece.

Scotty had taken the sapling from the cabin top. He handed it to Rick, who dove with it, thrusting the sharpened end into the mud far enough so that the sapling stayed in place.

Rick surfaced again and swam to the boat, which had drifted a few feet. Catching the leg of one motor, he pulled the boat back to where the sapling projected above the surface. He held the boat in position while Scotty took the sledge and drove the sapling down until its top was only a few inches above the water. Rick tested the pole. It was firm.

He removed the mouthpiece, treading water. "Looks okay. I'm going to start."

"Good luck," Scotty called.

Rick submerged and swam down, using the pole as a guide. The rope, attached to the pole, was perhaps two feet above the bottom. He freed the end of the rope, unwound a few feet, slipped the end through

his belt, and secured it with a slip knot. Then, hands extended, he began the slow work of covering the cove bottom inch by inch, searching for the thing that had splashed.

The boy swam in an ever-widening circle, the rope unwinding from the sapling as he moved. The unwinding of the line, which he kept taut, ensured that he would cover new ground each time he rounded the pole, but without missing any. He couldn't see, because his hands stirred up mud as he traveled. Only his sense of touch told him what was on the bottom. He wasn't afraid of grabbing a crab or an eel. All underwater creatures with any mobility at all get out of the way as fast as possible. He knew the compression wave caused by his movement would warn all living creatures.

His groping hands identified various pieces of wood, all natural, and assorted other objects including an old tire. There were cans, some of them food tins that had been opened, and some beverage cans, recognizable because of their triangular openings. Once he found a section of fishing pole.

It was a long, tedious job. The world closed in on Rick and there was only the murk outside his mask and the rhythmic sound of his own breathing. Only his hands, constantly probing the mud, were in touch with reality. He lost all sense of time. Once, to see how much ground he had covered, he pulled himself to the pole by the line, estimating his distance. He was about fifteen feet from his starting point. He returned to the full extent of the line and started the round again, after looking at his watch. He had to hold it close to see the dial through the murk. He had

been down only twenty minutes, although the time seemed much longer.

Ten minutes later his hand swept over something smooth. Instantly he turned in toward the pole, and swam back around the circle for perhaps ten feet. Then, covering the ground again by crawling along the bottom, he felt for the object. His fingers touched it. His first impression was of something cylindrical, but he made no attempt to pick it up. He needed to explore it thoroughly, first. His breathing was faster, and he knew his pulse had accelerated at the moment of discovery. If this continued, he would use air too fast. He willed himself to slow his breathing, and for a few seconds he stopped altogether.

In that instant, Rick heard a slap on the water, then another. He waited, holding his breath. There was a pause, then more gentle slaps. He counted them.

One, two, three, four—the signal for danger!

He and Scotty had long ago agreed that four sounds underwater would be the danger signal. He reacted instantly. The fishing line was in a pocket on his equipment belt. He took it out and pulled line from the spool. Then, probing deeply with one hand, he pushed the line under the smooth object, reached across and down with the other hand. When his hands met, he passed the line from one to the other and pulled the line through. Now it was around the object. He tied the line quickly, then rolled over on his back and looked upward at the surface. He could gauge the position of the sun, even though he could see no details. Using the rays filtering through the murk as a guide, he oriented himself.

"Which bank?" He thought quickly. Danger could only come from the mansion, and that was on the south bank. He turned and swam north, going slowly, paying out line from the spool. Now that he was traveling in a straight line, he covered the bottom quickly, and in less than a minute he was in shallow water. He stopped, afraid that his tank would show above the surface.

It was clearer in the shallows. He made out the line of a branch, or root of some kind that thrust its way through the surface. It would serve. Quickly he passed the spool around it and made a knot, then he pushed the spool itself into the mud and turned.

Now to find the boat again. Cruising slowly, he headed in the general direction, rising slightly as he swam. Finally, he found the boat by its shadow and swam under it to the stern. Again orienting himself by the sun, he made sure that the boat would be between him and the south bank. He surfaced and pulled off his mask.

Scotty was swabbing the deck of the cockpit as casually as though trouble was the last thing on his mind. Rick wondered briefly if he had imagined the danger signal, or had mistaken some other sound for a signal. Then Scotty hailed him.

"Where are all the clams?"

Rick's mind raced. Obviously someone was listening. Was the someone on the boat, or ashore?

"I only found one," he called back. "I don't believe there are enough in this cove to bother about, no matter what those fishermen said."

"Did you dig deep enough?" Scotty asked.

"As deep as I could without a shovel. The mud is two feet thick down there."

"Well, you might as well come aboard. I guess if we're going to have clam chowder, we'll have to buy clams from a commercial boat."

Scotty wouldn't invite him aboard if there was any danger, Rick knew. He accepted the hand Scotty held down and got aboard.

He surveyed the situation quickly. There was no sign of any danger.

"Pretty murky down there?" Scotty asked.

"Like swimming in ink."

"We'll try again out in deep water. It should be clear near the river mouth."

"Suits me," Rick said. "I never did think we'd find clams in this cove. The mano boats dredge in deeper water than this."

"Maybe the fishermen didn't want us stirring things up where they clam. Come on in and I'll fix you some coffee. I made it while you were down below."

"Okay."

Once inside the cabin, Scotty said softly, "Two men. On the shore. One is the bodyguard. I've never seen the other one before. Both of them have rifles."

Rick considered. "They couldn't possibly know the thing—whatever it is—dropped in the water here. Or could they?"

"I don't know. Anyway, they're suspicious. Did you find anything?"

"Just as you signaled. How did you signal, by the way?"

"With the mop pail. Four taps with the bottom on the water surface. Then I filled the pail and began swabbing down."

Rick nodded. "I don't know what I found. A cylinder, maybe two inches in diameter, maybe less. Smooth. I got the fish line around it and carried the line to the shore. We'll have to come back later."

"We certainly will." Scotty's eyes sparkled. "But for now, let's up anchor and get out of here."

"How about the stake with the rope on it?"

"The tide's still coming in. It will be completely under the water at high tide. We'll have to avoid it, and warn Harris if we don't get back tonight."

An idea was beginning to form in Rick's mind. "Okay," he said. "Let's get going."

Within minutes the houseboat was on its way out of the cove, the two boys acting normally, as though no one was observing their departure. Rick saw no one on shore, and not until they were sunward from the cove entrance did he see the sparkle of sunlight on binocular lenses. Scotty had been right, as usual.

CHAPTER XII

Night Recovery

On the way back from the airport, Steve Ames listened intently to the report of the day's activities, but delayed comment until supplies had been purchased, and a dozen eggs turned into an omelet that a French chef might have praised.

Rick was eager to discuss the whole affair with Steve, but the young agent was adroit at fending off questions without being rude, and finally the boy gave up.

Over after-dinner coffee, Steve smiled at both of them. "End of today's lesson in patience, which is one virtue neither of you has developed sufficiently. Okay, where are those two pictures?"

Scotty whipped them from the breast pocket of his shirt and handed them over without comment. Steve studied them for long minutes, then went to a table and took a magnifying glass from the table drawer. He placed the pictures directly under a lamp and studied them with the aid of the magnifier.

"It *is* Thomas Camillion," he said finally. "Your friend Sandy Allen has a sharp eye. I wouldn't have known him, either."

That surprised Rick. Steve had never met the owner of Calvert's Favor, but because of Camillion's notorious reputation, Rick had been certain that Steve would recognize him on sight.

Steve saw the expression on Rick's face. He grinned. "You disappointed? First of all, my knowledge of Camillion is not greater than yours. I've never seen him in person, or had any reason to study him. Crime isn't JANIG's business. Second, one expects to see a duck near water, or a squirrel near a tree. Criminals are generally found near centers of crime. They're not common in historic mansions, far from large population centers, so one doesn't expect to find them there. My reasons for not recognizing Camillion, without Allen's identification, are exactly the same as yours."

"It's just that we expect you to know everything," Scotty said half-seriously.

"Then I'm glad you're learning better. Joking aside, it's interesting that Camillion should be here. It's even more interesting that his sidekick is a crooked electronics engineer or scientist. When you add flying stingarees to that combination, it totals up to something novel in criminal ideas. But what?"

"We thought you might have an idea," Rick prodded.

"Yes and no," Steve said ambiguously. "What ideas do you have?"

Rick stared at him accusingly. "Are you holding out on us? Do you know something we don't?"

"Not yet," Steve said, and grinned at their expressions. "I mean that literally. I think I may possibly know something, but the evidence isn't in yet. It's

that computer run I mentioned. We should have the results tomorrow."

"All right," Rick said. He knew better than to push Steve for more information. The agent went in for speculation only when it served a purpose. With only a hint of evidence, he avoided guessing until the evidence had been checked out. "We figured out that the flying stingarees probably are balloons," Rick reported, recapitulating their conclusions of the previous evening.

Steve nodded approvingly. "Very good reasoning. Now connect up an electronics crook, Camillion, and that peculiar antenna."

"The balloons carry radio equipment," Scotty said promptly. "The antenna picks up their signals."

Steve nodded again. "That's reasonable. Now, why do the balloons carry radio equipment? And why are they launched?"

"We're like a dog chasing his tail," Rick said with a grin. "We're not getting anywhere, but we're covering plenty of ground."

"Maybe we are getting somewhere," Steve corrected. "You found something today that may be the balloon payload. You also found out that people from the mansion were interested in your activities, but didn't want to be seen. It's obvious that the object you found must be recovered. You've got a plan. I'm sure of it."

"We do," Rick agreed.

Scotty added, "First of all, we have to warn Orvil Harris. If he goes crabbing in the middle of the night, he might foul a prop on the stake we left there."

"The people in the mansion can't be suspicious of

Orvil," Rick went on. "He goes crabbing there every day. They must be used to him by now. Suppose we call him, to warn him about the stake, and to see if he'll help out."

"He'll be glad to help," Scotty said.

"Help how?" Steve asked. "By providing cover?"

Rick nodded. "Exactly. Scotty and I will suit up, so our skins won't show at night, and have our Scuba equipment on. Harris could come by and take the runabout in tow with us in it. We would drop off near the creek entrance and push the runabout into the channel where it would be hidden. Then we would swim into the cove and recover the object. With two of us, it would be a cinch to find the fish line."

"If the thing is too heavy to swim with," Scotty went on, "we'll hand it into Orvil's boat. Of course we'll pull up the sapling and hand that to Orvil. If the gadget is light, we'll swim back to the runabout with it, push the runabout away from the cove into the river, and then get aboard and come home."

Rick concluded, "With Orvil's motor going, no one would hear our bubbles."

Steve had followed the plan carefully. "Fair enough," he agreed. "It's a good plan. No one will see you enter the cove, and no one will see you leave. There will be only Orvil Harris catching crabs as usual."

Scotty spoke up. "We could make one change, Steve. You could be with us, either in the water or in the runabout."

Steve shook his head. "No thanks, Scotty. I have some business of my own later tonight. You carry out your plan and I'll carry out mine."

"Is your business connected with ours?" Rick asked.

"Yes, but I'm going to follow a different line of investigation. If it brings results, we'll compare notes at breakfast."

"We could postpone recovery and help you tonight," Scotty suggested.

Steve smiled warmly. "Thanks, but no thanks. What I have to do is for a lone hand. Rick, you phone Orvil Harris and make arrangements."

Rick consulted the telephone directory and turned to Steve. "Any chance the line may be bugged?"

"I doubt it. You might ask Orvil if he's on a party line, though. If he is, be careful. If not, go ahead and talk."

Orvil Harris had a private line, so Rick described their adventure in the cove and asked for the crabber's help. Harris responded at once, as the boys had known he would.

"I'll come by at half past three. You hook on and I'll tow you to the mouth of the creek, then you cut loose. We'll fix up the details when I see you."

Rick thanked him and hung up. "All set," he reported. "But we'll get little sleep tonight."

"It's only about eight," Steve pointed out. "You could go to bed right away." He managed to say it with a straight face.

"We could," Scotty agreed. "But we won't. How about a little television tonight?"

Steve waved a hand. "Take your pick. Medical drama, crime drama, western drama."

"The purpose of television drama," Rick declared, "is to provide an escape from the real world into the

world of fantasy. So no crime drama for us because that's the real world. We will watch a medical-type show."

"Western," Scotty said. "Trot-trot, bang-bang."

"Medical." Rick held out a hand dramatically. "Scalpel! Sponge! Quick, nurse, tighten the frassenstat! The patient is going into nurbeling aspoxium!"

"Western." Scotty crouched, hand curved at his thigh. "Make your play, Brant!"

"Medical." Rick tapped an imaginary stethoscope on his palm. "I regret that you have all the symptoms of thickus headus, Mr. Scott."

Steve held up both hands. "Whoa, Mr. Scott. You too, Dr. Brant. As the only impartial participant, I will select. We will improve your minds by finding a panel show about the problems of agriculture in Basutoland."

The boys groaned.

It turned out to be an entertaining TV evening, with one good show following another, and the late show an exciting sea adventure filmed many years before the boys were born, but one of their favorites from other late-night movies. The three had no intention of staying up to watch it, but lingered for the first reel—and were lost.

It was the same with the late, late show, a horror movie so badly done that it served as a new type of comedy. By this time, all were too tired to go to bed, and by mutual consent, they watched the program to the end, then rallied in the kitchen for sandwiches and coffee.

By the time the boys had retired to the houseboat, checked their equipment, and climbed into diving

suits of black neoprene with helmets and socks, Orvil Harris was coming down the creek.

Scotty checked the runabout outboard to make sure it would start easily and that there was plenty of gas, while Rick put their tanks and regulators aboard. Then, with a final farewell to Steve, the boys got aboard Orvil's boat, secured the runabout to the stern, and started off.

On the way to Swamp Creek, Rick and Scotty described their plan to the crabber. Harris slapped his thigh. "Now we're gettin' somewhere. You just lay the pole and rope up on the gunwale as I go by, and leave the rest to me. If the thing on the bottom is too heavy, I can pull it in. Got a line to put on it?"

Rick admitted they had forgotten that detail. "We can cut a length off the pole line."

"No need. Plenty of short lengths in that rope locker behind you. Take what you need."

The boys each selected a ten-foot length of half-inch nylon rope, sufficiently long for hauling the object up, if need be.

Harris asked, "Sure you can find your way underwater in the dark?"

"We have wrist compasses with luminous dials," Scotty explained.

"Good. Any danger of you comin' up under me?"

"No. We'll see the white bubbles from your prop. They'll be phosphorescent." Rick pointed to the crab boat's wake. Thousands of tiny bay creatures, most of them almost invisible bits of jelly, flashed blue white as the prop disturbed them, so that the wake twinkled as though studded with stars.

They fell silent as Harris crossed the Little Chop-

tank, the steady beat of his motor nearly lost in the darkness. Rick could not make out details or landmarks, but Harris knew the way as well as he knew the inside of his own boat. Rick enjoyed the coolness of the night, and even the heavy scent of the salted eel the crabber used as bait.

Harris tapped each boy on the shoulder in turn, and pointed. They could barely make out the entrance to the creek. They nodded, and shook hands, then Rick pulled the runabout towline and brought the smaller boat to the crabber's stern. Scotty stepped aboard and held out a hand. Rick joined him, casting off as he embarked. In a moment they were adrift.

It took only five minutes to get their tanks in place, put on fins, and go through their routine of checking weight belt releases, making certain that the emergency valves were in the "up" position on the tanks, and ensuring that regulators were operating smoothly. Rick slipped into the water with only a small splash, and Scotty followed. They took the runabout's bow rope and swam easily and quietly.

There was no hurry. Orvil Harris would need a little time to put out his lines. He would avoid the pole they had placed; its top would be above water at this stage of the tide.

Scotty led the way to the opening into the small waterway through which they had gone to the duck blind. He found it without difficulty, and for the thousandth time Rick marveled at his pal's sure sense of position and direction, even in darkness. The boat was pushed backward into the opening and tied to a root.

Rick rinsed his mask, put it on, and slid noiselessly

under the water. Scotty followed in a direct line, letting Rick pick the course, and following by the feeling of Rick's flipper wash on his cheeks.

It was like swimming in ink. Rick kept his hands out in case of unexpected underwater objects, but forged ahead at a good speed. He kept track of his own rate of progress through the water by timing the number of flutter kicks per minute. At the count of fifty he turned to the left, heading directly into the creek's mouth. He could hear the steady beat of Orvil's motor. When he estimated he had covered the proper distance, he stopped and let Scotty catch up with him. He put a hand on his pal's shoulder and pressed down, a signal to hold position. Then, very carefully, he swam to the top of the water and lifted his head above the surface. He could see the sapling a dozen yards away, slightly to his right. Orvil was putting out lines upstream, near the point where Swamp Creek widened into the cove.

Rick went under again and tapped Scotty. He headed for the pole, hands outstretched to intercept it. His left hand hit it and held. Scotty came alongside and they swam to the bottom. Both gripped the pole, put fins flat against the muddy bottom, and heaved. The pole came up without difficulty. While Scotty held it, Rick wrapped rope around it until the line was fully wound again. Orvil's motor was nearer now. Rick took one end of the pole while Scotty took the other. They operated entirely by touch; nothing was visible except the luminous dials of their compasses. The motor sound was muted in the burbling exhaust of their bubbles.

It was almost possible to stand on flipper tips with

head above water. The boys thrust their heads out with care, and saw Orvil bearing down on them, peering forward anxiously. He waved when he saw the two helmeted heads. There was a slight gleam from the masks even in the darkness. As he came alongside, the boys held the pole overhead, water churning under their flippers. Orvil bent and took it, lifted it on board, and continued on his path.

The boys went under again, operating on a prearranged plan. This time they swam side by side, hands searching for the fish line. Since Rick knew the approximate position where he had tied it to the projecting stump, he led the way toward shallow water, hoping to intercept it.

The water shoaled rapidly as the boys approached the shore. Scotty's hand suddenly gripped Rick's, and Rick felt the line.

At the same instant, Rick was aware of bubbles in the water, a trail of faint phosphorescence shooting downward past his mask. Then something glanced from his tank and he heard a sharp clang like a brazen bell in his ears. The impact rolled him partly over, and as he turned, another line of phosphorescence streaked past his eyes.

The skin on his back crawled in the blazing moment of recognition. They were being shot at!

CHAPTER XIII

The Night Watchers

Scotty, who had realized they were being shot at, was pulling at Rick's arm in frantic jerks, trying to lead him back into deeper water. Rick needed no urging. His fins thrashed in the shallows as he drove desperately for the safety of the deepest part of the cove, his hands keeping contact with the bottom.

The increased pressure on his eardrums told him they had reached the sanctuary of deeper water where the velocity of bullets would be absorbed before they could strike. He was bewildered. What had happened? Who was shooting? For a moment it crossed his mind that Orvil might be doing the shooting, but he dismissed it. He had no proof that the crabber hadn't suddenly turned on them; he just didn't believe it.

Yesterday Scotty had seen watchers on the shore, presumably from Calvert's Favor. Apparently the watchers were there now. The boys had gone into shallow water, and their tanks had shown above the surface, drawing fire. It was the only reasonable explanation. Probably the night watchers had seen the

pole handed up to Orvil, or had seen the faint light reflecting from their masks.

What had happened to Orvil?

One thing was certain. They couldn't stay on the bottom indefinitely.

Rick consulted his wrist compass and closed his fingers on Scotty's shoulder. He led the way toward the mouth of the cove.

Somewhere on the shore, he thought, the night gunmen were watching the line of bubbles. The boys' only hope of escaping detection had been to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Rick knew that was impossible with watchers on the shore. Watchers at four in the morning was one thing he hadn't expected. What had drawn them?

Suddenly he knew. While he, Steve, and Scotty had examined the mansion through glasses from Orvil's boat, Merlin and company, or a single guard, had been watching them. They had drawn attention not only to Orvil, but to the time of day when the guards would need to be especially alert.

Bubbles would attract the guards' attention, not only because they foamed on the surface, but because they would leave a glow of phosphorescence. How far would bubbles and glow be visible? He had a mental image of the watchers following the shoreline. They couldn't cross the creek or its mouth to where Steve's runabout was stowed, but they could shoot that far, if they could see the bubbles.

The only way for Scotty and him to escape was to eliminate the bubble track. That meant not breathing. Not breathing was possible for a short time. Dur-

ing the interval, they could swim into the marsh grass and use it for cover.

Rick's thoughts raced. He tried to recall the shoreline. There must be some promontory, some outcropping of grass, behind which they could hide. Perhaps the best way was simply to swim directly out from the creek mouth until distance hid the bubbles and darkness shrouded two black-covered heads.

There was a problem, though. Scotty's air tank hadn't been used until now. Rick's had, during the initial search yesterday. He estimated quickly. Less air is used at shallow depths than at deeper depths. The water depth for most of the way was shallow enough so that tank time was essentially the same as swimming on the surface. He had had at least forty-five minutes of air to begin with, and it might be stretched to fifty minutes. He probably had used no more than forty minutes of air, total. But the remaining ten minutes would not take them out into really deep water in the river itself, and then back to shore. There was not enough air to take them to Steve's place.

He had to make up his mind. Scotty, undoubtedly, was doing some fast thinking along the same lines. Their thoughts usually followed the same track in such situations. Rick touched Scotty's side and forged ahead, heading straight out. He counted his kicks, estimating distance covered. When he reached a count of three hundred he angled right, toward the north shore of the Little Choptank. They were well out of the creek now.

When the water shoaled, he found Scotty again

and pressed him down; then, very gingerly, he put his head above water, half expecting to feel the shock of a bullet.

There was a fallen tree nearby. He submerged again, touched Scotty, and led the way to its shelter. A cautious survey told him they were some distance from the creek mouth, and certainly invisible behind the waterlogged trunk and its load of leaves and other debris.

He put his lips to Scotty's ear. "Wonder what happened to Orvil?"

"We've got to find out," Scotty whispered back.

"Yes, but how?"

"We go overland."

Of course! They were on the same side as the boat, and not far away. There was the stretch of marsh between the channel and the creek. They could cross that, and overlook the creek. "Let's go," Rick whispered.

They inched their way along the fallen tree to the bank, then crawled slowly into the shelter of the marsh grass. The grass grew in a narrow swath at this point, with a tangle of scrub and trees deeper inland. They kept going until the scrub concealed them, listening for sounds from the creek. There was the beat of a motor. It sounded like Orvil's boat, and Rick thought it probably was. But would Orvil continue crabbing? Again the doubt came. Had the crabber tried to kill them? He couldn't believe it.

The boys stopped and slipped off their fins. "Lead on," Rick said softly.

"Okay. When we get to the boat, we'll wade across the channel and continue right on through the marsh

grass to the bank of the creek. We'd better be as quiet as possible."

"I'm with you."

Carrying their swim fins, the boys started through the dense growth, Scotty in the lead. It was hard going. Mosquitoes whined in a steady swarm around their heads, but with the neoprene suits and helmets, only their faces and hands were exposed. Each traveled with one hand outstretched to fend off branches, the other hand waving the fins to chase the insects from their faces. The outstretched hands were wiped frequently across the suits to get rid of the pests.

Rick was careful to step where Scotty stepped. When it came to silent tracking at night, the ex-Marine had few peers.

The two skirted the shore, keeping within the tree belt, until more marsh grass warned them that the water was near. The ground gave way to mud, and the mud to water. They stepped into the narrow channel up which they had gone to the blind. They now were less than two yards from the runabout. Scotty turned at once, and keeping to the water, moved upstream. Rick followed, careful not to splash. The darkness was less dense than under the trees, but he could not make out any details.

The channel ran roughly parallel to the creek, with a strip of land about thirty yards wide between the two. When Scotty estimated they were even with the cove, he left the channel and moved into the marsh grass again. Rick followed closely, careful to make no noise. In spite of their best efforts there was an occasional sucking sound as his foot or Scotty's pulled

out of the muck, and there was a steady rustle of marsh grass. He hoped that the sounds were drowned out by the steady chugging of Orvil's motor.

Scotty slowed to a cautious pace and Rick knew they were approaching the creek bank. The marsh grass did not thin appreciably. Rick wondered if the night watchers could see the tassels of the grass waving as they approached, and decided that the small motion probably was invisible against the high bank of trees farther inland.

Rick stopped as Scotty turned. Soundlessly, Scotty lowered himself to the mud, then inched ahead, moving each strand of marsh grass with care. Rick followed suit, and crawled in Scotty's track until he saw the glimmer of water. Then, moving with great caution, he drew alongside his pal. They looked out into the cove through a thin screen of grass stalks.

Orvil Harris was crabbing, as unconcerned as though nothing had happened. As Rick stared, disbelieving, the crabber's net swooped.

The crab boat moved on, exposing a glow on the opposite bank. Rick sucked in his breath. He could make out the forms of two men. One was smoking a cigarette. Both carried rifles.

CHAPTER XIV

Daybreak

Rick tugged at Scotty's suit, then crawfished backward through the marsh grass until he was sure the night watchers could not see him. He stood up, and Scotty joined him. Rick motioned toward their own boat.

The boys made their way back though the swamp to the runabout in almost total silence, each busy with his own thoughts.

Orvil Harris was crabbing as though nothing had happened, while the night watchers stood in plain sight on the opposite shore. Orvil must have seen the shots fired, Rick was certain. Even if he had been looking the other way, the first shot would have caught his attention.

Or, Rick wondered, had Orvil tipped off the two guards that divers were below? If so, the game was up. Once Merlin and company knew the payload had fallen into the cove, they would be diving for it themselves, under cover of guns. Merlin undoubtedly knew that the launching the evening of the squall had gone wrong, but he couldn't know how, or where.

But somehow, Rick didn't think Orvil had been a party to the shooting. Maybe it was stubbornness, refusing to think the crabber was involved just because they liked him. Or maybe it was because the crabber had no reason for helping Merlin and his gang; at least Harris had no reason known to Rick and Scotty.

They reached the boat and conferred in whispers that were inaudible six feet away.

"Could Orvil have put the finger on us?" Scotty questioned.

Rick shrugged. "I don't want to think so, and I don't. But I have to admit it's possible."

"If he's in with them, they'll be diving for the 'what's-it' at first light."

Rick glanced at the eastern sky. It was beginning to glow with the first hint of daylight. "That's not long from now."

"How are we going to recover it first?"

Again Rick shrugged. "There's only one way. Go in and get it."

"Under those guns?"

"A diver on the bottom isn't in danger from the guns. I could find the thing again without going into the shallows. That's what made us targets before, because we took the easy way to locate the fish line by going into the shallows near where I tied the line."

"Let's see your tank," Scotty whispered.

Rick unsnapped his harness release and swung the tank around. Their probing fingers soon identified where the bullet had glanced off. There was a dent, coated with silvery metal.

"Lead," Rick said. "Part of the slug."

"Good thing it didn't rupture the tank."

Rick shuddered. "If it had, I'd have been out of air suddenly and would've had to come up. Listen, Scotty. My plan is a simple one. I'll take your tank, since you have the most air, and swim right into the cove, find the 'what's-it' and swim out again. If it's too heavy to tow far, I can at least wrestle it part of the way, and then bury it in the mud. Meanwhile, you get the boat out where it's clear and be ready to pick me up."

"They'll see your bubbles, but they can't do anything about it with rifles," Scotty pointed out. "One thing they can do, though, is jump in after you. The cove isn't so deep that a pair of good swimmers couldn't tackle you. The lung wouldn't improve your chances by much."

"Too true," Rick observed. "But what else can we try?"

Scotty thought it over. "Listen, we'll take the boat out right now. You'll have to do the diving, because you know about where the thing is, and I don't. When we get out, you go over the side. I'll run around to the river, opposite where the guards are standing, and raise a little fuss. That might draw their attention away from the cove."

"Okay." It made sense to Rick. "They'll see both of us in the boat, but they won't see me get out. Only you'd better plan our course. I have no aching desire to collect a rifle slug where it hurts."

"They may not shoot if they see we're leaving," Scotty pointed out.

"Uh-huh. And they might shoot, anyway."

"They might. But we'll be moving fast, and I'll swing that boat from side to side like a swivel-hipped

fullback. Let's get going. We don't want too much daylight."

Scotty unsnapped his harness and Rick took his pal's tank and regulator. They put Rick's unit in the bottom of the runabout cockpit, along with Scotty's fins and mask. Rick put on his own fins and made sure he was ready to hit the water at a moment's notice.

Rick went to the stern of the runabout and felt down the motor leg to the prop to make sure it had not picked up any grass that might slow them down. It was clear. Scotty, meanwhile, untied the boat and slid into the driver's seat. Rick reached over the transom and pumped up the gasoline tank to ensure plenty of pressure, then he waded to the side of the boat and got into the seat next to Scotty.

"Pull us out to where the nose is almost projecting beyond the grass," Scotty whispered.

Rick did so, by grasping clumps of marsh grass and pulling the boat along. As the bow cleared the grass, Scotty punched the starter button, threw the runabout into gear, and shoved the throttle all the way forward.

The runabout jumped forward, slamming Rick back against his tank. The boat hit the shoal at the entrance and slowed for a long, breathtaking moment, then the driving prop pushed it over into deeper water. The stern went down and the bow lifted, and they were clear.

Scotty swung the boat to the right, putting its stern to the cove. Rick tensed, expecting any moment to feel the impact of a rifle bullet, either in the boat or in his own body. There was no sound other than the

racing motor, and he knew it would drown out the crack of a distant rifle.

The distance from the cove entrance widened. "Get ready!" Scotty yelled. "Lay flat and be ready to roll. I'll turn so the motor is moving away from you. When I tap you, we'll be directly in line with the cove entrance."

Rick moved out of the seat, keeping low, and lay on his side along the gunwale, facing Scotty. He put the mouthpiece in place and made sure he was getting air, then pulled his mask down. He was ready. The impact with the water would be hard, at this speed, but his tank would cushion the shock. He tensed for the signal.

Scotty swung the boat to the left, held it on course for a moment, then began a shallow turn to the right. That way, the motor would be steering itself away from Rick when he went over.

The boat came abreast of the cove entrance and Scotty slapped Rick on the shoulder. Instantly Rick rolled, one hand reaching for the back of his head, the other grabbing his mask. He hit the water on his back, his hand and the tank breaking the shock of the stunning impact. He threw his legs upward, and his momentum took him under the water instantly.

The racing motor receded, leaving him in silent darkness. He rolled over into normal swimming position and consulted his wrist compass. The creek entrance ran on a course of 80 degrees. If Scotty had gauged things correctly, that course would take him into the cove. If Scotty hadn't, Rick Brant would end up on the beach like a stranded whale.

Rick considered. The boat was gone, and it was ex-

tremely unlikely anyone had seen him leave it. The turn had caused the boat to tilt, lifting the side away from him. He was certain that the guards had not seen the maneuver. That being so, and taking into account his distance from the creek entrance, he thought it would be safe to look and check his course.

He held the compass in front of his eyes, and rose to the surface. He broke through slowly and without a splash. One look was enough. He should have trusted Scotty. He was dead on course.

Rick went to the bottom and began the long swim, counting his leg strokes. He and Scotty had practiced estimating underwater distance by the number and timing of their leg strokes. It wasn't an exact method, of course, but it was practical.

There were no underwater obstacles, and the depth was great enough. Rick remembered from the chart that the entrance into the creek varied from eight to eleven feet, dropping inside the creek mouth to about seven. No bullet could harm him if he stayed on the bottom. If the night watchers fired, the bullet would be slowed by the water.

He heard the sound of a motor and recognized it as the runabout. The sound faded again. Scotty was going through some kind of maneuvers. Then, in a short time, another motor made itself felt, more than heard. The slower beat identified it as Orvil Harris's crab boat. He was nearing the cove!

Like all divers, Rick's ears were sensitive to pressure changes. Sensing when the depth lessened, he knew he had reached the cove itself. Now to find the payload—if it was a payload. His groping hands began the search.

The first foreign object he touched was a cord. It was the wrong thickness for his own line, and he felt along it until he came to a soft, round mass, and knew he was touching one of Orvil's crab baits. He grinned in spite of the mouthpiece. Wouldn't Orvil be surprised if a diver came up hanging to his bait!

He let the crab line drop and continued his search. Once, Orvil passed within a few feet of him, and Rick wondered if the crabber had noticed the air bubbles from his regulator.

Rising ground told Rick he had reached the end of the cove. He turned left and held his course for about twenty feet, then turned left again, heading back toward the cove entrance. His hands never stopped moving, probing the mud for a trace of fish line. He crossed another of Orvil's crab lines, and kept going until pressure change told him he was back in the deeper water at the creek entrance. He turned right again. A check of his compass told him he was on course.

His groping hands trailed over a thin line. He grabbed it, and stopped his flutter kick. Then, moving with care, he turned and followed the line. His pulse was faster now, and he rigidly controlled his breathing. Fast breathing wouldn't do, and he would have to be careful not to let out a sigh that would cause bubbles to gush upward in one big rush.

A hand found the end of the line and the smooth cylinder to which it was attached. Orvil passed very close, and Rick looked upward. He could see the white circle of water around the single propeller.

Now to find out what he had. His hands stroked it from one end to the other. One end was rounded.

The other was a circle with an odd-shaped hole running into it. Rick poked his finger in, but couldn't feel the end of the depression. The only protuberance on the thing was a band near the rounded end. The band felt like metal, and had two rings projecting from it. The rest of the cylinder didn't feel like metal. The texture was that of a smooth plastic.

Rick lifted the object gingerly. It was hard to estimate weight under water, but he thought ten pounds would be about right. The total length was less than three feet. It would be easy to carry.

This time he needed a reciprocal compass course. It would be 260 degrees going out. He oriented himself properly, picked up the cylinder, and began the long swim back. He wondered if Merlin's guards were watching his bubbles. He had seen no sign of bullets, but he hadn't been looking for them. With Orvil's motor so near, it was likely he would not have heard the slap of a bullet on the water.

Pressure told him he was out of the cove. He breathed a little easier. Now to count leg strokes again. He looked up, and saw that the surface of the water was shining with light, the first rays of true daylight. Scotty would have no trouble finding him.

Because of the daylight, he continued on for a distance beyond where Scotty had dropped him. No use giving the guards too good a shot. Finally, exhausted, he surfaced. He lifted his mask and surveyed the scene.

Orvil Harris was still crabbing. Rick could see the boat, but the angle was wrong for him to see the crabber at work. He turned slowly in the water, and saw Scotty. The runabout was floating, motor off,

Now to find out what he had

about a mile away. He lifted an arm. The glint of first sunrise turned the lenses of Scotty's binoculars into a crimson eye, and Scotty waved back. In a few seconds Rick heard the motor start and saw the boat racing toward him. He kept his mouthpiece in place, and floated, waiting.

Scotty came alongside and reached down. Rick handed him the cylinder. Scotty put it on the seat without even looking at it. He gave Rick a hand and pulled him over the side. He asked anxiously, "Are you all right?"

"Done in," Rick said wearily. "But otherwise okay."

"Let's get out of here." Scotty put the runabout in gear and headed back toward Martins Creek.

Rick sat down and picked up the cylinder. There was a gob of mud still on it. He wiped it off with his hand and examined the thing. The material was fiber glass set in resin, and it was designed so the rounded nose could be removed. He didn't remove it, however. Instead he looked at the other end, down into the hole with the puzzling shape. It was like a cutout Star of David in shape, the hole gradually narrowing until its apex was almost at the other end.

The light dawned. Rick's lips formed the word. "Grain."

Scotty was watching. "What?"

"Grain," Rick said again. "This thing is a small solid-propellant rocket!"

CHAPTER XV

The Empty Boat

THE Swiss torsion clock on Steve Ames's fireplace mantle read 6:49. Rick and Scotty, in slacks, shirts, and moccasins, sat in armchairs and tried to stay awake. The small rocket, cleaned and dried, rested on a newspaper on Steve's table.

"Rockoon," Rick said. "That explains the funny antenna, the presence of the electronics expert, and why the stingarees are launched."

"Not to me, it doesn't," Scotty retorted. He sipped steaming coffee. "What was that word you used? Grain?"

Rick nodded sleepily. "That's what solid rocket fuel is called. It's poured into the casing around a form. The form is withdrawn after the fuel hardens. The shape is designed to give maximum burning surface. Since the solid fuel is grainy, it's called grain."

"Logical," Scotty replied with a languid wave of his hand. "All perfectly logical. I also understand that a rockoon is a combination of a rocket and a balloon. The balloon carries the rocket up to where the air is less dense, then the rocket fires and breaks

away. How does the rocket know when to fire?"

"Two ways. A barometric switch can be installed that will act at a certain altitude, or a signal can be sent from the ground."

"The antenna," Scotty said. "It can send a signal."

"Sure."

"I'm with you all the way, until you say this shows why the stingarees fly. Why send up rockoons? What's the reason?"

Rick forgot he was holding a coffee cup and waved his hand. He recovered in time to keep from spilling the hot liquid on Steve's rug. "Scientific research is usually the reason for rockoons. They carry experiments."

Scotty snorted. "Are you telling me Lefty Camillion has turned scientist?"

"Nope." Rick yawned. "I take it back. We still don't know why the stingarees fly. We only know what they are. Where do you suppose Steve is?"

"That's the eighth time you've asked. He'll be here when that business of his is over."

The telephone rang. Rick jumped to his feet and beat Scotty to the phone only because he was four steps nearer. "Hello?"

An unfamiliar voice spoke. "Stay away from the creek, and stay away from the house. If you don't, your crab-catching buddy is going to be turned into crab food." The line went dead.

Rick turned, eyes wide. Suddenly he was no longer sleepy. "Did you hear that? He said to stay away from the creek and the house, or our crab-catching buddy would be turned into crab food!"

"He must have meant Orvil Harris!" Scotty exclaimed. "Rick, let's get going!"

The boys started for the door at a run, but Rick stopped as his eye caught the rocket. "Check the gas," he told Scotty. "Steve has a spare can in the workshop. The runabout tank must be getting low. I'm going to hide the rocket."

Scotty left at a run. Rick picked up the rocket and surveyed the scene. Where could he hide it? He hurried into the kitchen and examined the cabinets, then shook his head. Too obvious.

The refrigerator caught his eye. An apron at the bottom concealed the motor unit. He knelt and pulled the apron free from its fastenings. There was room next to the motor—unless the heat of the motor caused the rocket fuel to burn. He opened the refrigerator and examined the control, then turned it to "defrost." It wouldn't go on until they got back. Hurriedly he put the small rocket in at a slight angle. It just fit. He snapped the cover back in place and ran to join Scotty, who was already in the boat.

"Gas okay," Scotty called. "Let's go."

Rick cast off and jumped aboard. Scotty started the motor and backed into the stream, then turned sharply and headed toward the river. Neither boy spoke. Their sleepiness was gone now, forgotten in their fear for Orvil.

Scotty held the runabout wide open, at its top speed of nearly twenty miles an hour. They sped across the Little Choptank River straight for Swamp Creek, with no effort at concealment.

Rick saw a low, white boat some distance down

the river and grabbed Scotty's arm. "Isn't that Orvil's boat?"

Scotty looked for a long moment. "It looks like it. Let's go see."

They swung onto a new course, in pursuit of the white boat. It might not be Orvil's, but it was like it. Both boys could now recognize the design characteristic of boats built on the Chesapeake Bay. The boats were known as "bay builts," and distinguished by their straight bows—almost vertical to the water line—square sterns, and flaring sides. The design was ideal for the shallow, choppy waters of the bay, and the boats could take a heavy bay storm with greater comfort and safety than most deep-water models.

As they came closer both boys looked for the boat's occupant, but there was no one in sight. Worried, Scotty held top speed until they were nearly alongside, then he throttled down and put his gunwale next to that of the crab boat.

"It's Orvil's," Rick said. "But where is he?"

"Get aboard," Scotty suggested.

"Okay." Rick stood up and timed his motion with the slight roll of both boats, then stepped into the crabber. Orvil's crab lines were coiled neatly in their barrels, the stone crab-line anchors and floats were stacked along the side of the boat. There were three covered bushel baskets of crabs, and extra baskets stacked in place. One open basket held a dozen jumbo crabs. Orvil's net was in its rack on the engine box, but there was no sign of Orvil himself.

Wait—there was a sign. Rick knelt by a small brown patch on the deck. He touched it, and a chill

lanced through him. Blood, and only recently dried. Orvil's?

Rick straightened. Someone had turned the boat loose, idled down to its lowest speed. The stable crab boat had continued on course, heading out the mouth of the Little Choptank into the wide bay. Only a bloodstain showed that there had been violence aboard.

The flying stingaree had claimed another victim!

CHAPTER XVI

Steve Waits It Out

THE two-boat procession moved down Martins Creek at slow speed, Scotty leading in the runabout and Rick following in Orvil's boat. The boys had decided to take the crab boat back to Steve's, because it could not be left adrift, and they did not know where Orvil berthed it.

Both agreed it was senseless to return to Swamp Creek. That wouldn't help Orvil, at least for now, and they might possibly be picked off by the riflemen.

As they neared the pier, Scotty moved out of the way while Rick backed the big crab boat into the runabout's place. Before he had finished, Steve was coming down the walk at a run.

The agent took the line Rick tossed and made it fast, then caught another line and secured the bow. Scotty backed in with the runabout and Rick helped him secure the smaller boat to the side of the crabber.

"Bumpers on the houseboat," Rick called. "Under the cockpit deck."

Steve hurried to get them, and they were placed between the crab boat and the runabout to prevent rubbing.

The boys climbed to the pier and faced their friend.

"We found the boat headed into the bay," Rick said grimly. "Bloodstain on the deck, but no other sign of violence. We had a phone call telling us to keep away from the creek and the house, or Orvil would be fed to the crabs. There's no doubt about it. They have Orvil."

Strangely, Steve replied, "Yes, I know. Come on in the house."

The three walked up the path to the farmhouse, with Rick and Scotty staring incredulously at the agent. How had he known?

"Did you get a phone call after we left?" Rick asked.

Steve shook his head.

"Then how did you know?" Scotty demanded.

Steve held up a hand. "Easy, kids. I'm trying to get my thoughts straightened out a little and make some plans. We'll talk it over shortly."

Inside the house, Rick went at once to the refrigerator. As the others watched, he pulled the bottom panel loose, took out the small rocket, and replaced the panel. Then he turned the refrigerator control back to normal and handed the rocket to Steve.

The agent examined it wordlessly, his forehead wrinkled in thought. Then he put it down on the kitchen table and investigated the state of the coffeepot while Rick and Scotty stood first on one foot, then the other, and fumed quietly.

Steve decided more coffee was needed and proceeded to make it. Not until the pot was heating did he motion the boys to sit down at the kitchen table. He joined them, turning a chair around and strad-

dling it, his chin resting on his hands on the back, his eyes alert.

"Testing our patience again?" Rick asked acidly.

Steve's warm grin flashed. "Sorry, kids. I was working over a few facts in my head, trying to make them add up. Okay, let's talk. Start by telling me about last night."

The boys reported, taking turns. "At first we thought Orvil might have told the riflemen guards we were on the bottom," Rick said finally, "but that's out. He's a victim, not a member of the gang. I saw his boat just before Scotty picked me up, but I couldn't see him."

Scotty picked up the tale. "After Rick dropped off, I made a high-speed run out into the river, then turned and headed for a spot on the north bank opposite where I thought the guards were. I got in close to shore and throttled down, deliberately giving them a chance at me if they wanted to take it. There weren't any shots, but I saw one of the guards. The visibility wasn't very good, so I propped the extra tank up in the seat and put my headpiece and mask on it, hoping any watchers would think there were two of us. I don't know whether they were fooled or not."

"Pretty smart," Steve approved.

"Thanks. I ran back out into the river and fished around in the locker under the seat. You had a few old wrenches there, and some rags. Well, I owe you a wrench. It was the biggest one, which means it isn't used very often on an outboard, anyway."

"Just so long as it wasn't my size seven-sixteenths wrench," Steve said with a grin. "Go on."

"It wasn't. I wrapped rags around it and tied them with a hunk of line, then searched for matches. I finally found a paper folder in the glove compartment. I had to open the gas tank and let out pressure to get any gas on the rags, and it wasn't easy, standing on my head in the cockpit. What I really needed was a Coke bottle. I could have made a Molotov cocktail by filling it with gas and using the rag for a fuse. Well, I made another run inshore and watched for the boys with rifles. They didn't show up. I got as close as I could without grounding, touched a match to my bomb, and heaved it into the marsh grass. My eyebrows took a beating." Scotty rubbed the slightly scorched areas.

"I wanted to set the marsh on fire, but the blaze was only a small one. I figured if the grass would burn, the riflemen would have to run upstream to safety. But the stuff only charred in a circle. Anyway, it scared them. They came running to stamp it out, and one of them took a shot at me. But I was nearly a mile out from the creek by then, and he didn't even come close."

"Let's hope I never have you two for enemies," Steve said fervently.

Scotty concluded, "I decided Rick probably had been in and out of the cove by that time, so I moved to where I could watch with binoculars, putting the sunrise behind where I thought he would appear. I knew I could see him better against the light. Finally up he popped, and away I went, and here we are."

Rick ended their recital. "We got back and took off our diving suits, then went for a swim with a bar of soap. When we were clean, except for my hands,

which got stained by the mud, we dressed and came into the house. We were sitting down enjoying coffee and trying to keep awake when the phone rang. How did those hoods get the number, anyway?"

"That's not hard," Steve said. "It's probable that Camillion's boys started checking up on you the moment you showed interest. My car is known at the local gas stations. It would be just a matter of asking who owns a convertible of that description. Name and telephone directory add up to the right number. Watching you enter Martins Creek would cap the information. You could be seen easily with glasses from the river shore opposite the cove."

The agent got up and turned down the stove as the coffee began to percolate. "My tale is pretty short."

"Wag it, anyway," Rick suggested.

Steve put a hand to his forehead. "Gags like that at this time of day cause shooting pains. Please be attentive, and not waggish."

"Ouch!" Scotty exclaimed.

Steve sat down again. "After you were safely on your way I changed to dark clothes, smeared a little black goo on my face, and took off for Calvert's Favor. I drove to within a half mile and parked the car in the woods, then hiked. The first thing I came to was a chain-link fence. It took some time to see if it was wired for an alarm—and it was. So I had to find a tree with a limb that overhung the fence. I'd taken the precaution of carrying a rope. I found the tree, fixed the rope to an overhanging limb, and down I went."

"We could have postponed recovering the payload and helped you," Scotty said reproachfully.

"Sure you could. But I'm used to operating alone, and I was interested in what you might find in the cove. Anyway, I approached from behind the barn and had to take cover when two men went by. They had rifles. They headed down the peninsula toward the cove. I scouted around, but no other guards were in sight, so I started with the barn."

Steve paused. "That is quite a barn. No hay, no oats, no horses. But it has the loveliest dish antenna in it you've ever seen."

"A microwave dish?" Rick gasped.

"Exactly. It's mounted on a truck, and I suspect the electronic gear is inside. I couldn't get a good look. There are also little cubicles inside the barn, probably horse stalls, and I could hear a man snoring in one of them. There wasn't much light, and I couldn't use my little flashlight beam too freely, but I did get a look at several gas bottles racked along one wall. They were big ones, of the kind used for commercial gases like propane or oxygen."

"Or hydrogen?" Scotty asked quickly.

"Or hydrogen," Steve agreed. "And that's probably what they contain, for inflating the balloons."

He got up, turned off the coffee, and poured three cups. "Along about that time, I heard rifleshots. You can imagine what I thought. I had a vision of two bodies sinking slowly into the mud. If I'd had a weapon, I think I'd have run down to see what was going on. But common sense got the better of me, and I figured it was highly unlikely that a pair of divers could be picked off with rifles if they were underwater. I was sure you had sense enough to stay down. So I left the barn and went to the house."

"You actually went in?" Rick asked, his eyes wide.

"Sure. It was safe enough. The gang was sleeping upstairs and the two guards were interested in you and Orvil. No papers were left where I could get them. There's a built-in safe, but I'm no Jimmy Valentine who sandpapers his fingers and opens boxes by touch. I couldn't do anything with it. Finally, I figured all had been seen that could be seen, and left the house. I could hear a motor racing, and I recognized the runabout, so I knew you were still alive. I retired to the woods behind the barn and headed for the riverbank. I saw Scotty hurl his homemade bomb."

Scotty shook his head. "I didn't see you."

"You weren't supposed to. I decided Scotty must be creating a diversion, and that meant you, Rick, were still diving in the cove. I took off for the cove, keeping a weather eye out for the guards. There was plenty of cover along the bank, so it wasn't hard. I got a good view of the festivities. After the fire was stamped out, the two guards walked up to the bank of the cove and waited until Orvil got close, then they pointed their rifles at him and invited him to come closer still. He didn't have much choice."

Rick thought that was an understatement.

"They questioned him for a while. Who were the divers and what were they after? Orvil played dumb. He said he knew nothing about divers and of course he had seen bubbles. He always saw bubbles. Marsh gas was rising all the time. He couldn't understand what all the shooting was about."

"Good for Orvil," Scotty muttered.

"He put on a pretty good act, saying he didn't know

what they were shooting at, but the guards weren't having any. They finally made him pull up his lines, throw his bait overboard, and get everything shipshape. Then one of the guards invited him to step ashore. Orvil balked and took a swing at the nearest one and got a rifle across the head. He dropped to the deck. That must be how the stain got there. They slapped him back into consciousness and made him get out. One guard held a rifle on him while the other put his weapon down and got in the boat. He took the boat out into the middle of the cove, aimed it toward the river, and put it in gear, then dove over the side and swam ashore. The boat headed out and the guards walked Orvil back."

"So he's alive," Rick said with relief.

"Probably. I waited until the parade went by, then fell in line. They took Orvil into the barn, and I managed to get a look through a window. They tossed him into one of the horse stalls and locked the barn door. I decided it was time to leave."

Steve sipped his coffee and made a face as it burned his tongue. "You can imagine how I felt. If one had gone away, I could have jumped the other. But two with guns, and me with not even a rock—I was dead certain to end up with Orvil. Besides, I couldn't take the chance."

Rick stared. If Steve felt he couldn't take a chance on rescuing Orvil, there had to be a good reason. The only reason Rick could think of was that Steve had decided there was more at stake than Orvil himself.

"We know where Orvil is," Scotty pointed out. "We can go after him. This time we'll be armed."

Steve shook his head. "Sorry. I wish it could be like

that, but we're not engaged in a personal vendetta. Orvil may be out of there by tonight, or he may not. He'll have to take his chances."

One thing had been bothering Rick, aside from Steve's untypical attitude about rescuing Orvil. "You haven't accounted for all your time. You could have reached here before we did if you had started back right away."

Steve shook his head. "I didn't. I went to the airport and used a public phone booth by the side of the road to call Patuxent Naval Air Station. In twenty minutes I had a Navy jet fighter on the Cambridge field. I handed the pilot the pictures you took and told him what to do with them, then I made another call to my office in Washington to tell them the pictures were on the way and to look them over and take action accordingly. We'll be seeing the results pretty soon."

The young agent stopped smiling. "Your little mystery has turned into a case for JANIG, kids. I'm pretty sure of my facts, but I'll know definitely before noon. Right now, you'd better finish your coffee and get into bed. You'll need sleep if things start to pop. That rockoon idea of yours about cinches things."

Rick blurted, "If it's a case for JANIG, there must be security involved somewhere. Is Wallops Island involved somehow?"

"Go to bed," Steve said sternly. "By the time you wake up, I'll have a lot more than guesses, and I'll give you the details then."

CHAPTER XVII

Crowd at Martins Creek

RICK and Scotty awoke to find four newcomers at Steve's house. Steve introduced them to Dave Cobb, electronics specialist; Joe Vitalli and Chuck Howard, JANIG agents; and Roy McDevitt from Wallops Island.

McDevitt, who had just driven over from the rocket range, was a tall, lean engineer dressed in slacks and a spectacular sport shirt emblazoned with tropical flowers. He shook hands cordially. "You're Hartson Brant's boys. We've certainly enjoyed having your family over at the island. When Barby and Jan leave, the whole base will go into mourning."

Rick grinned. "Somebody loses, somebody wins. We're anxious to have them back with us again."

Vitalli and Howard greeted the boys as old comrades. Although they had had no chance to become well acquainted, the two agents had been part of the JANIG team during the case of *The Whispering Box Mystery.*

Dave Cobb, who was scarcely older than the boys, had been hastily borrowed from the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington. He spared no time for

greetings other than a cordial wave, and immediately got to work on the rocket Rick had found in the cove.

The group pulled chairs up to the kitchen table on which Cobb was working, and watched.

Cobb studied the rocket for a few minutes, then took a pointed tool and pressed it into a spot five inches below the rounded nose. He rotated the cylinder and pressed a similar spot on the other side. Rick saw a thin line appear around the rocket below where Cobb had pressed.

The electronics specialist gripped the cylinder above and below the thin line and twisted. The nose of the rocket came off. Cobb pointed to a pair of metal prongs that extended out of the nose into the rocket casing. "Contacts," he said. "They press against strips inside the rocket casing. The whole assembly acts as a dipole antenna."

No one commented. Cobb took a tiny screwdriver and removed two screws from a metal plate in the bottom of the nose cone. The screws were long ones, holding the entire nose assembly in place. With the screws laid carefully aside, Cobb tapped the cone and the assembly dropped into his hand.

"A terrific job of miniaturization," he commented. "First-rate design." He pointed with a screwdriver to a segment about the size of two silver dollars stacked together. "Tape recorder. It accumulates data, then plays it back in a single high-speed burst."

Rick watched, fascinated, as the electronics expert identified components and circuits. The whole unit, scarcely larger than a common soup can, contained receiver, tape recorder, transmitter, batteries, and

command circuits that could be triggered from the ground. It was a highly complex and beautifully engineered package for receiving data, storing it, then retransmitting it.

"But why?" Rick demanded. "Why send up a rockoon at all? What data does it receive and transmit, and what do the people at the mansion do with it?"

"What Rick is asking," Scotty observed, "is the question that has puzzled us since we got here. Why do the stingarees fly?"

Steve waved a hand. "Patience for just a few more minutes. Anything else, Cobb?"

The electronics expert shook his head. "Not unless you have specific questions. In summary, this is a very elegant little assembly of receiver, data recorder, transmitter, and command circuits."

"Fine. McDevitt, what about the rocket?"

The man from Wallops Island shrugged. "Nothing very complex about it. It's a simple solid-fuel rocket with star grain, fired by a squib that is commanded from the ground. A squib is simply an igniter to start the fuel burning. Battery power makes it glow red hot when turned on."

"How high an altitude would the rocket reach?" Steve asked.

"It's difficult to be precise, but I'd estimate the balloon carries it to ten thousand feet, then it is fired by signal from the ground at the proper time. The rocket would go to about one hundred thousand feet, plus or minus twenty thousand. In other words, I'd guess its maximum altitude at nearly twenty-three miles."

"Did you say fired at the proper time, or proper al-

titude?" Rick asked quickly. He wanted clarification of the point, although he was sure McDevitt had said "time."

"The altitude isn't important. I'd say time was the principal factor."

"But if altitude isn't important, why use a rockoon? Why not use a rocket launched directly from the ground?" Scotty demanded. He looked puzzled.

Rick looked at Steve expectantly. The young agent smiled. "Got the answer, Rick?"

"Maybe. It's a matter of secrecy, isn't it? The folks around here were puzzled by the flying stingarees, but they would have been more puzzled by rocket firing. They'd have been curious enough to want to know why the rockets were being fired, and it's certain that an investigation would have resulted. By using rockoons, with balloons that didn't look like balloons, Camillion confused the issue. People who reported seeing things got laughed at, mostly because they call any unidentified flying object a flying saucer. The rockets fired only when high in the air, where people wouldn't notice."

"Two did," Scotty reminded him. "Remember? We had two interviews where the people saw spurts of flame."

"Sure," Rick agreed, "but they had no idea it was a rocket taking off from a balloon. And only two out of the whole bunch even noticed flame at all."

Steve nodded. "You've hit it, Rick. It's the only answer that makes sense."

"Not until we know what data were collected by the rockoons," Rick said stubbornly. "That's the

whole key. Nothing will really make sense until we know that."

"We ran the dates and times of sightings through the computer with a lot of other dates and times for various things," Steve explained. "I had a hunch, but the computer turned it into good comparative data."

"What data?" Scotty demanded.

"Every single sighting you collected coincided with the launching of a research rocket from Wallops Island!"

The boys sat back, openmouthed. Rick said, "So that's why the glow from Wallops Island in the southeastern sky was so significant. That's what put you on the trail!"

"Right," Steve agreed. "The yellow glow is from sodium vapor rockets fired from Wallops. The rockets allow visual measurement of meteorological data. People around here are used to seeing them to the southeast, over Wallops. When I saw that sightings had been made over Swamp Creek at the time of sodium shots, I got an idea. It wasn't much to go on, but it was at least a good clue. The computer did the rest."

"Then Lefty Camillion and his friends have been intercepting data from our rocket launchings at Wallops," Scotty said unbelievingly. "But why? How could Lefty use data like that? It's all straight, unclassified scientific and meteorological stuff. He's no scientist."

Steve grinned. "I doubt that he even knows what the data are. He and his friends are a bunch of

chuckleheads of the very worst kind. But about what he does with the data—Joe Vitalli has been doing some investigating along that line."

Vitalli nodded. "With the FBI. They put agents on the case and found out Lefty had been in touch with the Soviet Embassy in Washington, through a third secretary whose function it is to gather various kinds of scientific intelligence. We're not absolutely certain, but it looks very much as though Lefty plans to sell his data tapes to the Soviets."

"So that's why JANIG has moved into the case," Scotty concluded.

"On the nose," Steve agreed. "Now it's time to move in on our foolish friends at Calvert's Favor. Do you boys want to take a hand?"

"Try and leave us out," Rick said with a grin. "JANIG is welcome to assist us, but the flying stingarees are our babies. Scotty's and mine, that is."

"Be glad to have you help," Scotty echoed.

The JANIG men laughed. "You've got a point," Chuck Howard conceded.

"Want to plan the operation?" Steve asked with a twinkle.

Rick held up his hand. "Whoa! We didn't say that. You've got information we don't have."

"Only one piece of information," Steve replied. "The time of the next launching from Wallops Island."

"When?" Rick asked eagerly.

"At dusk tonight."

CHAPTER XVIII

The Stingaree's Tail

"THIS is the plan," Steve Ames said. "Joe and Chuck will approach from upriver and go around the mansion fence by wading downstream. They'll stay under cover somewhere at the edge of the mansion grounds until they hear my signal on the radio to close in—or until they see the balloon launched. I'll go in the way I did before."

The two JANIG agents nodded, and bent over the chart borrowed from the houseboat.

"Cobb will set up his equipment here at my house," Steve continued, "and try to intercept all signals from the mansion. McDevitt will set up here too, and track the balloon through my telescope—if it rises—watching until the rocket fires. McDevitt also will keep in touch with Wallops Island by radio, and notify me on the walkie-talkie when the countdown reaches thirty minutes."

Steve turned to Rick and Scotty. "Before I go to my post, I'll take you two to the creek mouth in the runabout. Then you will swim up the creek, underwater, and take up stations in the weeds directly in front of the house."

Rick's pulse stopped. "They'll see our bubbles," he protested. "It would give the whole show away!"

Steve motioned to Joe Vitalli. "Show 'em."

Joe walked to the car in which he and Chuck had driven from Washington, and opened the trunk. He brought out a pair of riot guns, automatic shotguns, which he handed to Chuck, then he reached into the trunk and brought out a pair of small cylinders with full face masks attached.

"Rebreathers!" Rick exclaimed. He grinned at Steve. "You planned this before you ever told us what was on your mind!"

"I thought it was best to be prepared," Steve said. "You know how these work?"

Rick nodded. "We both do." The rebreathers, unlike Scubas, which were filled with compressed air, used oxygen which was recycled through a canister of chemicals that removed water vapor and carbon dioxide. They were completely self-contained; no bubbles were emitted.

Cobb was already opening a pair of leather-covered cases, exposing electronic gear. He had also brought a portable antenna, which he began setting up. McDevitt had a radio in his car with which to talk to Wallops, and Steve handed him one unit of a walkie-talkie radio network. Another unit went to Chuck, and Steve retained one.

Steve glanced at his watch. "Let's get going. Time your travel so you will be in place at eight o'clock on the nose." He looked at the boys. "Get into your gear, and take spear guns with you. When we move into action, I want you to bring that balloon down if you can."

The boys ran to the houseboat. Rick was excited, and he knew Scotty was feeling the same way. It was the first time they had been in on a JANIG operation as full partners. Their previous adventures had either been as accidental participants or as observers.

They got into full gear, including their skin-tight neoprene helmets and footgear. Then, leaving their fins and rebreathers, they hurried back to the others. Joe and Chuck were in their own car, the riot guns and walkie-talkie out of sight. McDevitt had the telescope set up next to his car and was practicing with it by tracking a high-flying osprey. Cobb was finishing work on his electronic setup. His antenna was in place, the dish on top of the collapsible pole aligned on the compass direction to Calvert's Favor.

Steve shook hands with Joe and Chuck. "On your way. See you when the balloon goes up." He motioned to the boys. "Got spear guns?"

"We left that till last," Rick said. "Ready to go?"

"Ready."

The three hurried down the pier to the houseboat, where the boys took guns from their spear box. Each chose a high-powered gas gun, operated by a carbon dioxide cartridge, and selected the spears that would cut the biggest holes. There would be time for only one shot.

"Get on the floor in the runabout when we cast off," Steve directed. "If there are any watchers, I want them to see only one man."

The boys cast off, then climbed in as Steve backed into the creek. They crouched on the floor and adjusted the straps on their face masks until the fit was tight. There was no conversation. Rick was so excited

it was hard to sit still. As they began the crossing of the Little Choptank River, Steve gave them instructions. "When we get opposite the creek mouth, the engine is going to stutter and kick up a lot of smoke. The boat will drift into the smoke and out again. You'll have a few seconds to go over. I'll pretend to work on the motor, and finally get it started, but running rough. Then I'll take off and pretend I'm heading home. Okay?"

"How are you going to make smoke?" Rick asked.

Steve reached into his breast pocket and produced a small bottle. "These are chemicals that smoke when they touch water. Got your plans all made?"

Rick looked at Scotty. "We'll have to stick our heads up once in a while. I'll lead, since I know the creek as far as the cove. When I think I'm lost, I'll head for the north bank, making a sharp turn. That will be your signal to stay put, while I look. What I'd like to do is bring us out in back of the duck blind. We can pick our spots then and cross the creek when we're ready."

"Got it," Scotty agreed.

Steve reached down a hand and squeezed their hands in turn. "Good luck, kids. And no unnecessary chances. If shooting starts, get underwater again. We'll have guns, but you'll have only single-shot spear guns."

"Good luck," the boys said in unison. They put on the masks and turned the valves that started the oxygen cycles. Rick grinned at Scotty through the glass, and knew that his grin was strained. Scotty grinned back and held up his hand with thumb and forefinger making the signal for "Okay."

"Be ready," Steve said.

Rick checked himself once again to be sure all was in order. Weight belt, knife, compass, spear gun with safety cap on, mask fitting tightly, and the pack in place. He got ready to jump on Steve's command.

The outboard slowed, raced, slowed, raced, backfired, slowed. Steve's hand went over and trailed chemical in the water. The boat turned, and Rick saw the smoke cloud rising. The boat went into it, and the motor cut out.

"Go," Steve said.

Rick stood upright and went over the gunwale in a dive, knifing toward the bottom. He felt the pressure wave as Scotty followed and reached a hand upward to meet his pal. His hand touched Scotty's arm, found the hand, and gave it a squeeze. Then, with a glance at his compass to orient him, Rick started the long swim.

It was odd to be wearing the oxygen lung. The sound of bubbles from the customary compressed-air Scubas was missing, and the silence was strange. Then Steve started the motor of the runabout and Rick heard the broken rhythm as the motor skipped. He knew that Steve probably had turned the carburetor mixture to too lean or too rich. Either would cause the motor to run rough. He kept moving, his fins keeping a steady stroke. The motor sound grew distant, and finally faded entirely.

Rick usually depended on pressure to tell him location, but the creek was too shallow for any strong indication on his ears. He kept going until the visibility and brightness told him he was in the shallows, then steered out into the middle of the stream again.

He thought they must be halfway to the mansion, but wasn't sure. He gave a pair of swift kicks to alert Scotty, then turned sharp left, rolling over on his back. He could see the water surface clearly. Rising a little, he lifted his face above the water for a brief second, then went back under.

Now was the time to get behind the duck blind. Rick swam back to where Scotty waited, and plucked at his shoulder. This time he started off close to the north shore, heading directly for the duck blind. His course was straight. In a few moments he found himself among the pilings and turned to put the blind between himself and the mansion on the opposite shore. Scotty followed.

Rick lifted his head cautiously. He saw only the marsh grass and the back of the blind. He tapped Scotty, who rose until his head was level with Rick's, his face only a few inches away. They pulled off their masks.

"We can swim under the blind and look out the front," Rick whispered. "There's enough brush to give us cover. We'll each pick our own spot and go to it. Sound all right?"

"Okay. Better fix our guns right here, though."

It was good advice. Rick removed the safety cap from his spear, making sure the barbed shaft was properly seated. Now he needed only to flick off the safety catch and fire. Scotty did the same.

"You go right and I'll go left," Scotty suggested softly. "Be better if there's a little spread between us. We'll also want to find places where we can look out. There's some weed along the shore, and I think I remember a brush pile around a stake near the right-

hand edge of the lawn. One piling is there. There's a bunch of old pilings off to the left where the original pier was. I can see if there's cover there. If not, I'll find something."

Scotty had worn his waterproof watch. It was just four minutes to eight. Time to get going.

The boys shook hands, grinned at each other, and pulled their masks back on. They ducked under the blind, side by side, and swam to the front of the structure where brush from last year's cover remained.

Cautiously Rick peered out, then sucked in his breath. A truck had been wheeled out of the barn. It had a dish antenna on top. And next to the truck, a mass of black plastic was slowly inflating. A flying stingaree!

Rick looked quickly for a spot to which he could swim. Near the edge of the cut lawn was the piling Scotty had mentioned. It was tall, with a light on it for night navigation. Rick realized he had seen it on earlier trips, but had not noticed it particularly because his attention had been on the house and its occupants. Slightly upstream from the tall piling were a series of stakes, saplings pushed into the bottom to indicate the limits of water deep enough for a boat. Around three of the pilings brush and grass had gathered, picked up from the current. The middle pile was highest. Rick decided to head for it.

Scotty was also searching for a hiding place. Apparently he found one that was satisfactory, because he gripped Rick's shoulder for a moment, then submerged. Rick saw him as a shadow, hugging the bottom.

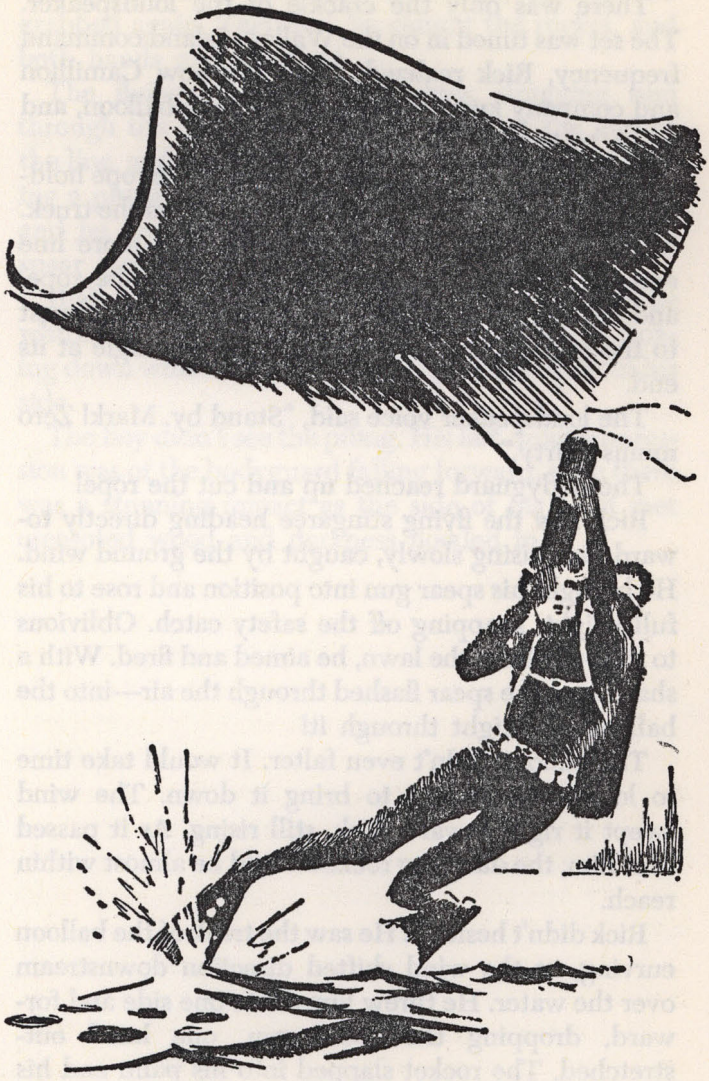
Now was the time. Rick took a deep breath to quiet his taut and shaky nerves, then sank to the bottom and began the last leg of the trip. It was only a few dozen yards to the sapling he had chosen. He reached it and glanced upward. The mass of debris made a black blotch on the bright surface of the water. Moving with infinite caution and using the sapling as a guide, he swung his legs under him and rose to a sitting position. The debris was still above the level of his eyes, so he swung his legs back again and knelt. The kneeling position brought his head to just the right level. He lifted his face and looked at the debris. Working cautiously, he brought a hand up and poked a hole through. His fingers enlarged the hole until he could see sufficiently.

The flying stingaree was tugging at the rope that held it! The shape was almost perfect, Rick thought, but he doubted that it had been designed to look like a sting ray. More likely it had been picked to look as little like a conventional balloon as possible. Well, it had served its purpose.

Merlin, alias Lefty Camillion, and his electronics wizard were fitting a rocket into a loop on a plastic strap that dangled from the balloon. Rick couldn't see it clearly, but thought it was a replica of the one he had recovered.

There was sound from the truck containing the dish antenna. Rick pulled his mask away to hear a little better and heard a loudspeaker, rebroadcasting something.

". . . reports no aircraft within range limits. We are now at thirty-one minutes and counting. On my mark the time will be zero minus thirty exactly."



The flying stingaree lifted him!

There was only the crackle of the loudspeaker. The set was tuned in on the Wallops Island command frequency, Rick realized. That was how Camillion and company knew when to release the balloon, and when to trigger the rocket!

Camillion's bodyguard was manning the rope holding the balloon. It was attached to a ring on the truck. As Rick watched, the bodyguard let out more line and the balloon rose slightly, tugging at the rope, and moving toward Rick. The tail hung down almost to the ground, the rocket hanging at an angle at its end.

The loudspeaker voice said, "Stand by. Mark! Zero minus thirty."

The bodyguard reached up and cut the rope!

Rick saw the flying stingaree heading directly toward him, rising slowly, caught by the ground wind. He brought his spear gun into position and rose to his full height, snapping off the safety catch. Oblivious to the yells from the lawn, he aimed and fired. With a sharp hiss, the spear flashed through the air—into the balloon and right through it!

The balloon didn't even falter. It would take time to lose sufficient gas to bring it down. The wind swept it right toward Rick, still rising. As it passed over him, the dangling rocket would be almost within reach.

Rick didn't hesitate. He saw the track of the balloon curving, as the wind shifted direction downstream over the water. He threw himself to one side and forward, dropping the spear gun, one hand outstretched. The rocket slapped into his palm and his fingers closed around it. The jerk pulled him forward

and he grabbed with his other hand, missed, and grabbed again. This time he caught the rocket, and both hands gripped tight.

The flying stingaree lifted him, dragging him through the water. Rick spun around at the end of the line, and caught a glimpse of the bodyguard raising a pistol to shoot at him! Then the scene whirled and he saw Scotty, standing in water to his waist, spear gun lifted to fire.

Rick saw the spear leave his pal's gun, and he whirled his head in time to see the bodyguard looking down with horror at the shaft protruding from his side.

The boy didn't see the piling. His last quick impression was of the bodyguard falling forward, then there was a stunning impact as the side of his head met creosoted wood and darkness flooded in.

CHAPTER XIX

Lucky Lefty

Rick awoke to fiery agony. His face was burning, the flames searing his flesh. He tried to reach a hand up to ease the pain and found the hand gripped firmly. He struggled, and Steve's voice said, "Take it easy, Rick. We'll be through in a minute."

The boy subsided and gritted his teeth. If Steve was there, it was okay. But why didn't Steve put out the fire?

"Don't move," Steve said sharply. "I don't want to hurt you any more than I can help."

Rick closed his eyes and fought the pain. He heard Steve say, "Give me the spray can." Then something cool and soothing spread over his face.

An arm circled his shoulder and raised him to a sitting position. He opened his eyes and looked into Scotty's worried face. Rick managed a grin. "It's okay," he said hoarsely.

"If being alive is okay, then it's okay," Scotty said with relief. "But you're a mess, boy."

Rick looked up dazedly. Steve was smiling at him, and next to Steve, Orvil Harris! "Glad you're all right," the boy murmured.

"Thanks, Rick. I'm glad you finally came around. You had us worried for a bit. And, Rick, meet my cousin Link."

A tall, gaunt man stepped forward. "Howdy, Rick? How do you feel?"

"Woozy," Rick said honestly. "Help me up, somebody."

Scotty lifted him, then guided him to a lawn chair. "Sit down. You're too weak to stand."

Rick subsided gratefully. He could see better now, although it was nearly dark. There were other people seated in chairs on the Calvert's Favor lawn. Camillion, his electronics expert, and two others. At full length, covered by a blanket, was the guard. He looked up at Rick, his eyes dull and malevolent, but he said nothing.

"What happened?" Rick asked.

Joe Vitalli stood behind Camillion and company, his riot gun ready. The JANIG agent was wet up to his armpits. Chuck Howard came into sight from behind Rick, and he carried an open first-aid kit.

"You jumped for the balloon," Steve reminded him. He motioned to the bodyguard. "This one tried a potshot at you and Scotty nailed him with a spear. Then you smashed into the piling and got knocked out. The piling was rough. Your mask was ripped off and your face dragged along the wood just enough to take the skin off and leave you full of splinters. We were taking the biggest splinters out when you came to. How does your face feel?"

"Awful," Rick said. The soothing effect of the antiseptic spray was wearing off and the pain was returning. "Where's the balloon?"

"On the ground behind you. Scotty got to you first, and with his weight on it, the thing finally came down." The young agent grinned admiringly. "We had to pry your hands off the rocket. Never saw such a stubborn cuss in my life. Out cold, and still holding on."

"Persistent," Rick said weakly. "Not stubborn. Did you round up the whole gang?"

"The whole lot."

Lefty Camillion glared at Rick from a chair on the other side of the small circle.

"Why did you do it?" Rick asked. "What did you hope to gain?"

The syndicate chief shrugged, but kept his silence.

"I can shed a little light," Steve said. "Some of it is speculation, but it stands up. Lefty knew his appeal against the deportation order was almost certain to be turned down. Within a few weeks he'd be on his way out of the country. The FBI has been trying to get the full dope on Lefty, and one thing they found was that expensive living had taken most of his money. He needed cash, in other words. This was the way he chose to get it, collecting the data transmitted by the research rockets from Wallops and selling it."

Rick shook his head, then winced. "It's a crazy idea," he said. "I don't know why. I just know it is. I could tell you, but I can't seem to think."

There were sirens far away, but getting closer. Scotty put a hand on Rick's shoulder. "Don't try to think now, old buddy. The ambulance is coming. Plenty of time to talk when you're feeling better."

Rick nodded weakly. It was getting very dark. He

closed his eyes and leaned back. Scotty kept a hand on his shoulder.

The ambulance, led by a state trooper, pulled into the grounds. An attendant and an intern jumped out. "Who's hurt?" the intern asked.

"This one first," Steve said. "Then the one on the ground."

Rick felt a hand grip his chin and opened his eyes. The intern was examining his face with a strong flashlight beam.

"Messy but superficial," the intern said calmly. "I'll bet it hurts."

"You win," Rick muttered.

"How did it happen?"

Steve described Rick's accident briefly. The intern nodded. He shined the light into Rick's eyes and watched the pupils contract. "Possible concussion. We'll check at the hospital." He knelt and took a roll of cloth from his bag and unwrapped it to disclose hypodermic needles in a sterile inner wrapper. He fitted a needle to a syringe and found a bottle of alcohol and a vial of sedative. Working swiftly, he wiped the vial top and Rick's arm with alcohol, then drew fluid into the syringe. "This will help the pain," he said, and pressed the needle into Rick's arm.

"Now," the doctor said briskly, "let's look at the next one. What happened to him?"

"Fish spear in the side," Steve replied.

Scotty and the attendant helped Rick to the ambulance. He lay down on the stretcher gratefully and closed his eyes. Scotty stayed with him while the attendant went to help with the bodyguard.

"Quite a party," Rick said faintly.

Scotty covered him with a blanket. "You missed most of it, but I'll give you the details tomorrow. How are you feeling?"

"Groggy." Rick's eyes were closed. He was never sure at what point he drifted off into deep slumber. He knew only that he had no recollection of the bodyguard being placed next to him or of the ambulance leaving Calvert's Favor.

Rick awoke to bright daylight. The pain in his face had subsided to a faintly aching stiffness and he felt fine. He knew from the surroundings that he must be in a hospital, probably at Cambridge. He groped for the call bell and found it wound around the bedpost. He pushed it. In a few moments a nurse came in.

"Well," she greeted him, "how are you this morning?"

"Hungry," Rick replied promptly.

The nurse, a pleasant-faced woman of middle age, smiled. "That's a good sign. Let's see what we can do. Ready for visitors?"

"Send them in," Rick said cheerfully. "Or is it just one?"

"Two." The nurse went to the door and beckoned. "I'll send in some breakfast," she said, and left.

Rick's hand touched his head gingerly. The right side of his face was bandaged, the pad held in place by tape that crossed his forehead and circled down under his chin. He probed gently and discovered that the sorest places were his temple and an area just in front of his ear.

Steve Ames and Scotty came in and greeted him with wide smiles. "The nurse says you're hungry," Steve said. "Sounds like the old Rick."

Scotty asked, "How about crab cakes for breakfast?"

"Bring 'em on, followed by a dozen steamed clams and an order of fritters," Rick replied. "How's the bodyguard?"

"Well enough so his disposition is pretty nasty," Steve reported. "He'll be here for at least a week before the jail cell opens wide. Seriously, Rick, are you all right? Apparently there was no concussion."

"I'm fine," Rick assured him. "But I'll bet this bandage makes me look like a survivor of Custer's Last Stand."

Steve and Scotty drew chairs up to the bed. "One last look by the doctor and we'll take you home," Steve told him. "If you feel up to it."

"What'll I do for clothes?" Rick asked.

"They're in your closet," Scotty replied. "We brought them with us. Last night we took your gear home after the hospital folks peeled you out of it."

"Good." Rick looked at his two friends. "Now suppose you tell me what happened last night? I must have been out like a light while the excitement was running high."

Scotty nodded. "I'll start. I was behind one of the pier piles when the bodyguard cut the balloon loose. I jumped out for a clear shot, but by then you had put your spear through the thing. I was going to add mine for good luck when I saw the bodyguard reach for the old equalizer and draw a bead on you, so I shifted targets. I looked back at you just in time to see you dangling from the stingaree like an extra tail. And right then you went boom into the piling. But would Brant ever let go of evidence? Not you, ol'

buddy. There you dangled, limp as a wilted banana while the balloon drifted along with you. I started toward you as fast as I could go, which wasn't very fast with water up to my waist."

"Wish I could have seen it," Rick said with a grin.

"So do I," Scotty assured him. "Camillion and his friends were also somewhat interested in you. They started down the lawn, and I was sure they'd get to you before I could. Only then Joe and Chuck stepped out of the bushes not ten yards from where I'd been hiding, and yelled to the lads to hold fast and get their hands high. Steve stepped around the corner of the barn with a .45 in his mitt and emphasized the point. Lefty and company got the idea and skidded to a stop with all brakes locked. I put on more speed, and Steve joined the chase."

"I didn't see you hit the piling." Steve picked up the story. "But I heard it. When I saw that the boys had things under control with their shotguns, I stepped on it and got to you a few seconds after Scotty had grabbed you by the waist. When I saw your face, I had a few bad moments until I could take a closer look. You were a bloody mess, to put it mildly, with more than a few splinters adding color. But I could see your manly beauty wasn't gone forever. We pried you loose from the rocket and stretched you out on the lawn. Your pulse was pretty good and you were breathing steadily, so we gave you a few whiffs of oxygen from Scotty's tank for good luck."

Rick could appreciate how worried his friends must have been in spite of their half-humorous report.

"Lefty spoke up," Steve continued. "It was the only

time he spoke. He's said nothing since. He said, 'There's a first-aid kit in the kitchen.' We got it, and went to work on you. Of course we put in a call to the police, and asked for an ambulance. Joe Vitalli kept a watch on the crowd and Chuck went into the barn while we pulled splinters out of you. He found Orvil, and he also found Lincoln Harris."

"I remember meeting him," Rick nodded. "I was too groggy to be surprised."

"He was okay. They hadn't mistreated him. Link said he had gone up the creek just in time to see them launch a balloon with a rocket on it, and they got the drop on him with rifles, then grabbed him. His curiosity got the better of him. He'd heard about the people at Calvert's Favor and decided to take a look, the waterways being free to all navigators. Orvil had a bump on his head, but otherwise was all right. Lefty hasn't talked, but I suspect he had plans for their release, once he was safely out of the country."

"Where is Lefty?" Rick asked.

"He and his friends are in the local jail. You know, Lefty is a chump. But he's also an excellent example of what happens to people when they start operating in unfamiliar fields."

"Why is he a chump?" Rick demanded.

"Because every bit of data he went to so much trouble to collect was his for the asking, if he'd only waited until it was processed."

The light dawned. Rick knew at once what Steve meant. "That's what was trying to get to the surface in this addled brain of mine last night. Of course! Wallops Island is an unclassified launch site. Everything about the launchings is reported in scientific

publications! But, Steve, the Soviet Embassy was interested in buying the stuff!"

Steve chuckled. "Sure, but not for a very high price, I suspect. The Reds are so suspicious they can't believe that a country like the United States can afford to give away data. They'd buy the tapes just to make sure we weren't holding back information they could use."

"Even a casual investigation would have told Lefty the data from Wallops firings is published by scientific publications," Scotty pointed out. "How could he have been so stupid?"

"He fell into a natural trap," Steve answered. "Most people think there is military secrecy connected with rocket firings. They don't make a distinction between the civilian space agency and the military services. But the law does. It says the National Aeronautics and Space Administration is required to report on its scientific findings."

"And it does," Rick concluded. "Dad has already written a report on the instruments for measuring solar X rays. The scientists who actually use the instruments will also write a report on the data they obtained."

"That's it," Steve agreed. "What's a little more puzzling is why the electronics expert didn't know. I suspect he has been concerned only with the design of telemetry equipment and not with any actual launchings or space experiments."

"Maybe he did know," Scotty offered. "He might have kept quiet just to get money from Lefty for doing the work on intercepting the data. You know we had the clues, but it never occurred to us there might

be a connection between Wallops Island and the stingarees, because who could imagine going to all that trouble to intercept open, unclassified data you can get by asking for it?"

Rick had to laugh. "Whether he knew or not, it's still a joke on Lefty, and on us for not suspecting the connection. And poor Lefty won't have a nest egg to take back to Europe with him."

"He won't need a nest egg," Steve corrected. "Lefty violated the law by kidnaping Link and Orvil. I don't know whether we can make a federal espionage rap stick or not, since the data he was collecting was unclassified. But we'll try. Anyway, he won't be going back to Europe. He'll end up in a Maryland prison, or a Federal one. Either way, it'll be some years before he has to worry about money."

"Lucky Lefty," Rick said. "A cell of his own, plenty of food, and no worries about money. We did him a favor."

Steve grinned. "Just don't expect any gratitude for a favor like that!"

CHAPTER XX

Hunt the Wide Waters

THE cruising houseboat *Spindrift* moved sedately across Eastern Bay, off the main Chesapeake Bay, toward the town of Claiborne. It was a lovely day with a blue sky dotted with occasional fair-weather clouds. The temperature was in the low eighties, the wind gentle, and the water warm.

Rick Brant sat on the bow of the houseboat, with his feet dangling over. Next to him sat Jan Miller. His sister Barby, with their mother and father, were relaxing in deck chairs on the sun deck, while Scotty piloted the boat.

Now and then the bow dipped, and the spray splashed up in a cooling shower. Rick enjoyed the feeling of the cool spray, and the taste of salt on his tongue. Jan did, too. Rick thought she made quite a picture with her white bathing suit and golden tan contrasting with her dark hair. His one regret was that he couldn't swim with Jan, Scotty, and the family. Both Jan and Barby were expert Scuba divers, and he had looked forward to spearfishing with them in the bay. The girls had brought their own

Scuba equipment in the luggage compartment of Hartson Brant's car.

Rick's bandages had been reduced to a single jumbo-size gauze patch, but his folks would not allow him to go swimming until his face was entirely healed. He knew they were right, though he chafed under the restriction. Even so, swimming was really only a small part of the fun of houseboating, and the ban on swimming wouldn't last long.

Jan had put on a fresh bandage for him after breakfast that morning, and remarked in her soft voice, "It will be completely healed in another day or two, Rick. You can go swimming then."

Meanwhile, he had found an acceptable substitute. Steve Ames was a subscriber to *Bowhunting Magazine,* and in a back issue Rick had found an article on fishing for sting rays with bow and arrow. Steve had loaned a bow, and Rick had invested in fishing arrows and a reel for the bow. So far, he had found only one sting ray, and in his excitement he had failed to take into account the refraction of the water. He aimed where the ray seemed to be—but wasn't.

Rick's pretty, blond sister called down to him. "Rick! There's a sand bar at the tip of that point."

He looked to where Barby was pointing and saw a good-sized sand bar extending out under the water. "I see it, Sis. Thanks. It will be a while before we get there."

Jan smiled at him. "Going to try again?"

"You bet I am. Got to catch up with you somehow."

Jan had bagged a ten-pound rockfish underwater on the day before, and they had baked it in a driftwood fire on a beach at Poplar Island. Rick was as

proud as though the catch had been his own. He had been Jan's diving instructor and had taught her how to stalk a fish.

"You can catch up day after tomorrow when the folks will let you dive," Jan assured him.

"Can't wait that long," Rick replied. "I'm going to find a fifty-pound ray right now."

"Go get your bow," Jan said. "I'll join the others and we'll all spot for you."

Rick got to his feet and gave Jan a hand up. He went down the catwalk to the cabin while she went up the ladder to the top deck.

The bow was in the closet. Rick checked the string, then strung the bow and selected two arrows. He went out on deck and stopped at Scotty's side. "Looks like a good place. Cruise slow and easy and be ready to maneuver. If there's a ray there, I want it."

"Okay. Go for broke, Robin Hood. What I can't understand is why you don't shoot for something edible."

"Can't," Rick said cheerfully. "Edible-type fish don't hang around waiting for boats to bring bowmen close."

He climbed the rear ladder to the upper deck and joined his family. Hartson Brant smiled at his son. "Next time we let you go off by yourself don't get involved in mysteries. Then you won't have to bowhunt inedible sea animals."

"It's fun," Rick returned. "I'd want to do it even if I could spear fish. Want to take a shot?"

"I'll take a shot after you've boated your first ray."

"Fair enough," Rick agreed.

Mrs. Brant asked, "Where are we going, Rick?"

He pointed to the peninsula. "Around that land. There's a creek on the other side called Tilghman Creek. The cruising guide says there's a good anchorage just inside. If it looks all right, we'll spend the night there. If not, we'll go across to the Wye River. Tomorrow we'll go down the Miles River to the town of St. Michaels and put in supplies."

The scientist smiled at his wife. "It's nice to relax and have our children do the work and the thinking, isn't it?"

"It's too good to last," Mrs. Brant returned.

Barby and Jan were standing far forward, close to where the cabin top curved downward to the forward deck. Rick joined them.

"This is fun!" Barby exclaimed. "Rick this houseboat was the best idea you ever had!"

"We all should have traveled down together," Jan said. "Then the whole family could have been in on the case of the flying stingaree."

"That will be the day," Barby replied. "When Rick Brant lets us in on any real adventures, I'll know the world is coming to an end." Her tone changed suddenly. "Look, we're getting into shallow water. Keep a sharp lookout!"

Rick went down the ladder to the foredeck and tied his arrowhead to the fish line wound in the reel on his bow. He nocked the arrow and got ready to shoot. He looked up at the two pretty girls standing above him. "Let out a yell if you see a dark blot."

Barby gave him a scornful look. "Of course we'll yell. Did you think we were standing here waiting for flying saucers to land?"

The houseboat plowed through a patch of sea grass and emerged over sandy bottom. Rick kept careful watch, but he knew the girls would see the first sign of a ray before he did, because of their higher vantage point.

Steve would enjoy this, he thought. The JANIG agent was back in Washington, his vacation interrupted again because of the work that remained on the case of Lefty Camillion. Lefty was in jail, too, along with his friends.

Rick shook his head. He was still amazed at the mobster's stupidity in creating such an elaborate setup to get data that was his for the asking. Apparently it just hadn't occurred to Lefty that a rocket range could be without secrets.

If there *had* been secrets, though, the system was a good one. By using the combination of a balloon and a rocket, Lefty got his equipment high enough to intercept Wallops Island telemetry, and he did it without anyone suspecting he was launching rockets. The rockets and balloons dropped into the ocean, unseen —or, if seen, the first thought would be that they had come from Wallops. The shape of the balloons also kept anyone from suspecting that the theft of data was the real purpose. It was a fine scheme, even though it had all been unnecessary.

The girls let out a yell that startled Rick from his reverie. Scotty immediately throttled back, and the boat's momentum carried it forward. Rick watched the water, and finally saw a dark blur on the sandy bottom ahead and to the left. He drew, then waited until he saw the dark patch move. This time he al-

lowed for the water's refraction. He loosed the arrow.

The stingaree felt the impact and reacted violently. Its tail lashed up to strike with sharp barbs at the intruder. The tail lashed the arrow shaft without effect. The ray's wings moved in a rippling motion like that of some weird flying carpet. It flashed upward, and into the air, then crashed back on the surface of the water again. It dived, heading for the bottom.

Rick kept the drag on his reel, letting the ray fight against the braking action. The fish didn't give up easily. It had the primitive nervous system and great vitality of its relatives, the sharks, and it fought long after an edible fish, like a rockfish, would have given up.

When the ray moved toward the now stationary boat, Rick reeled in line. When the ray showed a new burst of energy and started away, Rick let it fight against the drag, pulling out line.

The girls were down on the foredeck with him now, and Scotty had joined the Brants on the upper deck in order to get a better view of the fight.

Finally, the ray tired. Rick drew it in close to the hull and waited while the vicious tail lashed futilely. Jan took the gaff that Scotty handed down to her and gave it to Rick. He hooked the sea beast and lifted it from the water.

"Stand clear!" he warned. "I don't want either of you getting hit with that tail!"

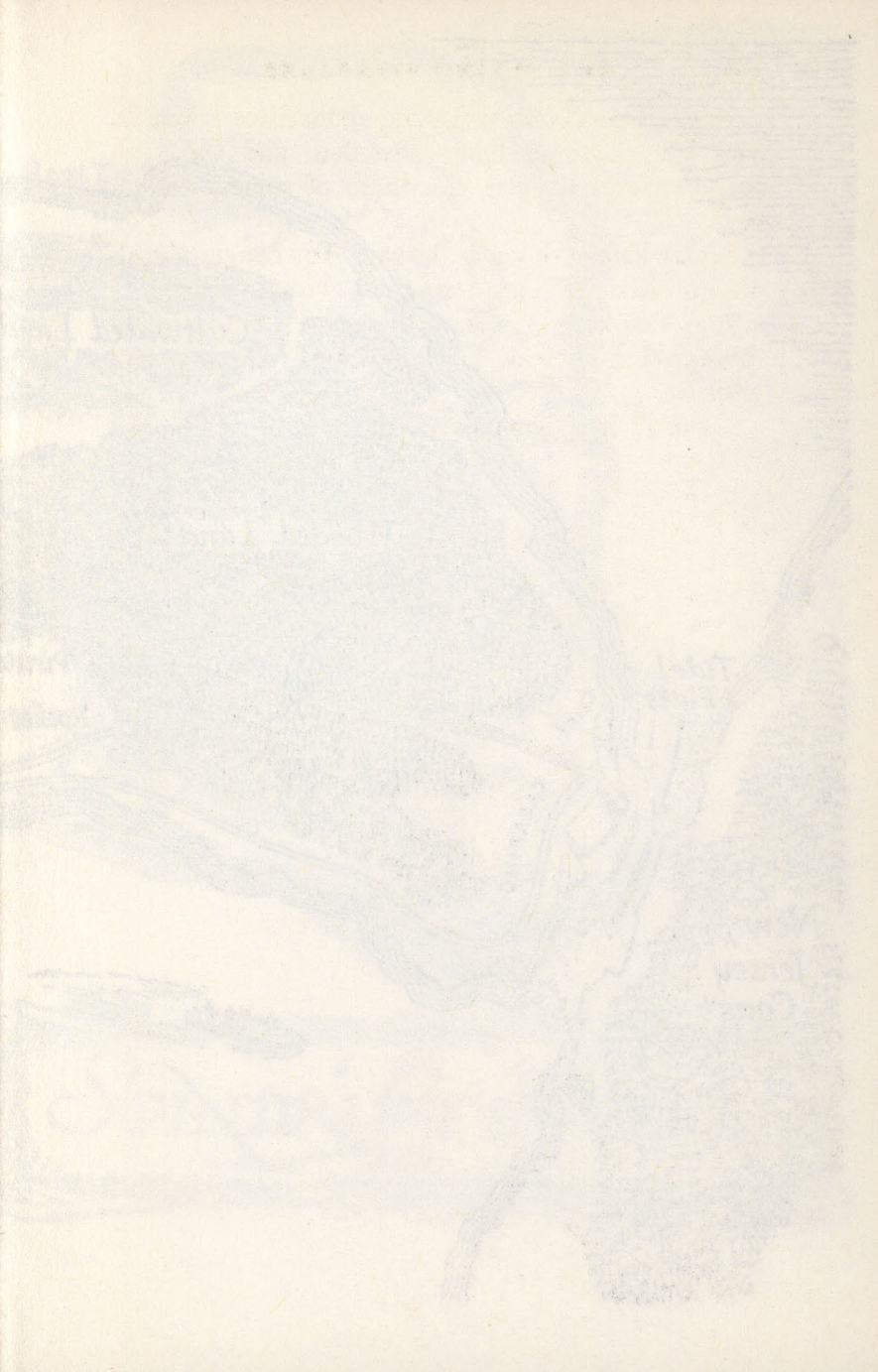
The girls hurried up the ladder to safety, and Rick lifted the stingaree to the deck.

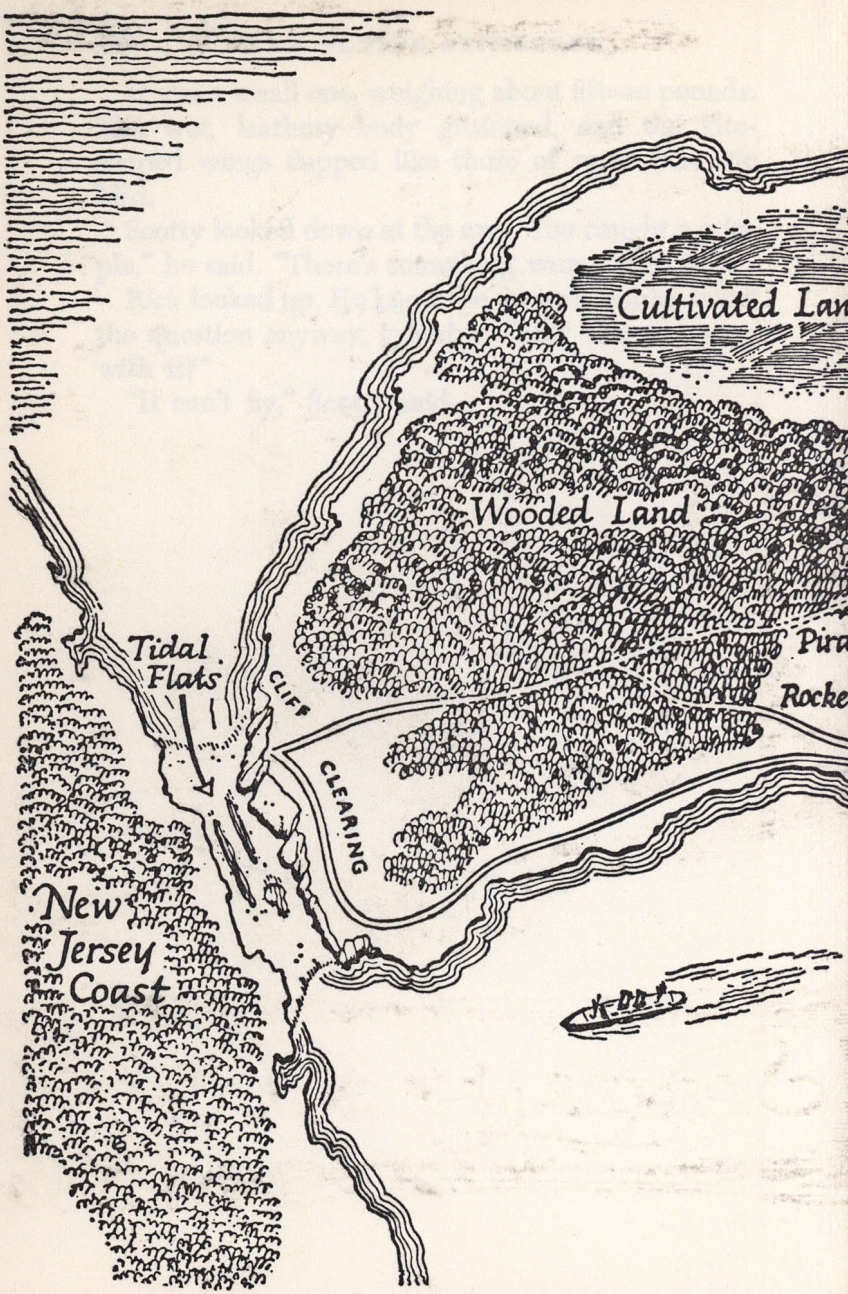
It was a small one, weighing about fifteen pounds. The wet, leathery body glistened, and the kite-shaped wings flapped like those of some fantastic bird.

Scotty looked down at the ray. "You caught a cripple," he said. "There's something wrong with it."

Rick looked up. He knew the answer, but he asked the question anyway, grinning. "Yes? What's wrong with it?"

"It can't fly," Scotty said.

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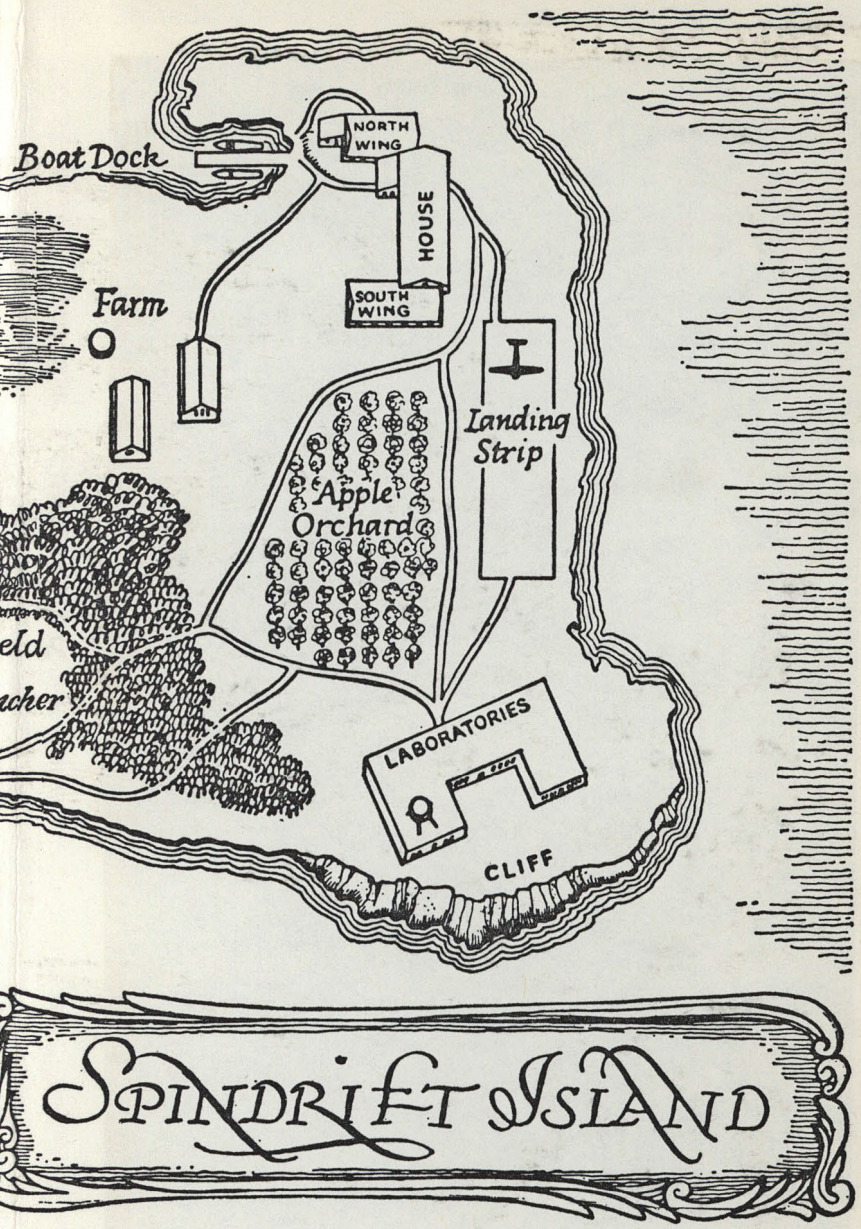

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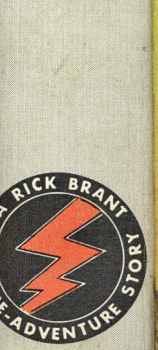

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